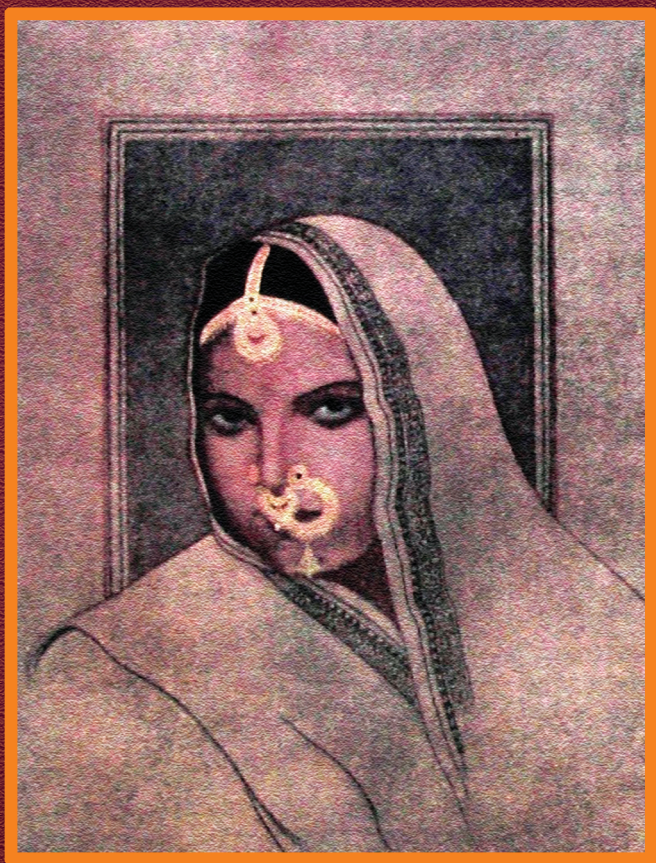


# The Memory Makers

Women Autobiographers of Odisha



*Edited, introduced & translated from the Odia by*

**Supriya Prasanta**



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**Grass flowers**

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Published by Grass flowers

Manikonda, Hyderabad 500089, India

Email: grassflowers2023@gmail.com

First published by Grass flowers in 2011

Second and Revised Edition: 2024

Original Writings © Individual Authors

Introduction & Translations © Supriya Prasanta

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*Cover Painting*

“Pallibadhu” (1933) by Bimbadhar Barma

*Typeset and Cover design*

B. Shankar Rao, Bhubaneswar

Printed in Hyderabad, India

**Price Rs 800/**

**ISBN 978-93-6128-635-3**



## **Dedication**

The book is dedicated to the liberating spirit of individuality that informs the writing between its covers.

## Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	5
<i>Introduction</i>	7
The Memory Makers: Women Autobiographers of Odisha	
1. Ramadevi Choudhury	48
2. Sarala Devi	73
3. Godavari Devi	78
4. Annapurna Maharana	88
5. Annapurna Das	108
6. Nirupama Rath	113
7. Sumani Jhodia	120
8. Aparna Devi	135
9. Sitadevi Khadanga	139
10. Pitambari Devi	151
11. Gita Hota	162
12. Pratibha Ray	173
13. Pratibha Satpathy	183
14. Bina Dei	189
15. Radha Devi	202
16. Snehalata Mohapatra	210
17. Durgabati Tripathy	219
18. Mandakini Das	239
19. Rama Devi	243
20. Sanghamitra Mishra	253
<i>Bibliography</i>	261
About the Editor	271

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## Acknowledgments

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*The Memory Makers: Women Autobiographers of Odisha* brings a selection of excerpts from twenty Odia women's life narratives published between 1978 and 2015 in English translation. My lasting interest in women's writing must be instinctive; reading and researching Odia women's writing has been a way of understanding myself better.

I express my heartfelt thanks to all the writers who have given me their permission to publish excerpts from their works in English translation. I also owe my indebtedness to the family members of writers, who are no longer in our midst, for granting me their consent for the same.

It may be mentioned here that the present book forms a part of my doctoral thesis submitted to Utkal University in 2010 under the supervision of Jatindra K. Nayak, former Professor, Department of English, Utkal University. The thesis focused on the development of autobiography as a form in Odia literature, women writer's contribution to this genre and the problems of translating life narratives. I most sincerely thank him for his valuable suggestions during the research.

In 2009, I received the Charles Wallace India Translation Fellowship which offered a residency at the British Centre for Literary Translation (BCLT) based in University of East Anglia. I express my gratefulness to Richard Alford, former Secretary of Charles Wallace Trust, for his abiding interest in my work. To Valerie Henitiuk, former Director of BCLT, I owe a singular debt

of gratitude for her quiet understanding; collaborating with her on two books of women's writing from Odisha – *One Step towards the Sun* and *Spark of Light* – was invaluable learning experience for me. I am grateful to Amanda Hopkinson, the former Director of BCLT, for her warm hospitality and help. I cherish the friendship of Bhaswati Ghosh, writer and translator, who now lives in Canada. Lakshmi Holmstrom, the celebrated scholar and translator of Tamil literature, was always indulgent during my stay in Norwich; my sincere homage to her memory.

I may mention here that I received a Junior Fellowship from the Department of Culture, Government of India for carrying out this research. A SRTT library fellowship from the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University gave me a chance to explore the rich archives there and enhanced my understanding of the history of women's movement in India and abroad.

I express my thankfulness to the staff at the libraries of the following institutions: Odisha State Archives, Bhubaneswar; Sikshasandhan: A Resource Centre for Education, Bhubaneswar; University of East Anglia, Norwich; British Centre for Literary Translation, Norwich; Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata; National Library, Kolkata.

To Professor Bibudhendra Narayan Patnaik, I owe a deep sense of gratitude for his unconditional affection for me. I fondly remember the loving encouragement I have always received from Sanghamitra Khuntia, my teacher from Ramadevi Women's College, Bhubaneswar. My father, Souribandhu Kar, who transitioned on 13 April 2020, embodied the virtues of social commitment and conscientious activism; he remains a guiding spirit in my life. My family members on both sides have extended their kind support whenever I sought their help. I heartily express my indebtedness to all of them.





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## Introduction

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### I

#### Into the Sun

The personal narratives discussed in this book were published between 1978 and 2015, all written by women born between 1898 and 1953. More than five decades after the publication of Phakirmohana Senapati's *Atmajeevancharita*<sup>1</sup> (1927), the first autobiography in Odia, Sitadevi Khadanga published her autobiography *Mora jeevan smruti* in 1978.<sup>2</sup> This was the first example of an Odia autobiography written by a woman. Though forty-four years have passed since, the number of full-length autobiographies has reached a bare twenty by the year 2023. The fragmentary accounts discussed here have been retrieved from literary journals, newspapers and unpublished papers. One may assume that there might be more such full-length and fragmentary accounts lying scattered and unnoticed, self-published or otherwise, and without promotion or sale had no chance of coming into public notice or gaining popularity.

Women autobiographers here reminisce the time that spans late nineteenth century through twentieth century and early twenty-first century. Such a long time span in the history of any place would become important for several reasons; it became more so in Odishan context as it coincided with the introduction of institutional education by the British, movement for the formation of a separate province on the basis of language and the nationwide

movement for independence. The narrators here bear witness to the radical transformations that took place within Odishan society and shed light on significant social, cultural and political changes. They also assiduously map the journey of women, entities known as *asurjampashya*, those who did not even see the sun, to individuals unapologetically stepping “into the sun”<sup>3</sup> – the history of women’s stepping out of the private to the public space is as fascinating and fraught with complex negotiations and insurmountable difficulties in Odisha as elsewhere in the world.

Back in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the world of women remained more or less confined within the four walls of the house in Odisha as elsewhere in British India. A very early marriage, household chores, pregnancy, looking after children, observing rituals and fasts and following the societal code of conduct unquestioningly summarised women’s lives. For women like them, to quote V.S. Naipaul, “ambition, if the word could be used, was a series of negatives, not to be unmarried, not to be childless, not to be an undutiful daughter, sister, wife, mother, widow.”<sup>4</sup> Change entered this world slowly and often painfully, and women who responded to it and let it reshape their lives, took hesitant steps and embarked upon a difficult, endless voyage. The personal narratives included here illustrate how the issues women faced when they engaged themselves with their intimate and social surroundings were more complex and nuanced as it has been commonly held. They invite us to have a peep into their psyche in their moments of unselfconsciousness. What is often overlooked in general discussions is the assessment of personal temperament of individuals when they are part of a larger reality. When their natural tendencies are taken into consideration, while some excerpts in this book help reinforce established ideas of mainstream women’s history, others challenge a number of assumptions and offer alternative perspectives. By focusing on great periods of transformation, they offer valuable perspectives gained through their gendered experience and counter reductionist conclusions.

## II

### **The Great Famine and Female Education in Nineteenth Century Odisha**

The British East India Company took various steps to reinforce their presence in Odisha once they took over its reins in 1803. Spreading education among the natives was one of the means to strengthen their administration and propagate their ideas. Needless to say, their ideas collided with a society, which had its world views developed on the principles of ancient scriptures and its collective experience of life. To begin with, literacy among the mass was dismal. The missionaries established the first school in Cuttack in 1823. During 1857-58, there were three high schools in coastal Odisha, where the number of students was less than three hundred. In garjat areas, there were no schools.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the British conquest, as the records show,<sup>6</sup> there were village chataśalis, which were attended by a handful of pupils mostly from upper caste families of landlords, ryots, karanas, matibansa oḡhas and samantas; there were also tols for learning Sanskrit, which were attended by boys from brahmin families. Maktabas were attended by boys from Muslim families. Girls, if ever few of them could learn the alphabet and counting, they learnt it from their family members, often from their school going brothers, cousins<sup>7</sup> or in some privileged cases home tutors.

The nineteenth century British occupied Odisha was scattered; there was hardly any idea of a united Odisha among the natives.<sup>8</sup> The main administrative region, Cuttack Division was placed under the Bengal province. The western parts of Odisha were attached to the Madras and Central provinces. The garjats enjoyed some autonomy and constituted the feudatory states under the British. The British created several administrative units to govern different regions and introduced a number of new rules and regulations. Lives of commoners remained, by and large, hard and uncertain. In an economy based primarily on agriculture, they had to endure the tyranny of not only the British administrators, but the local kings and zamindars. Initially, the British introduced a number

of changes in land laws. The surveying of land and collection of taxes were not received favourably among the natives. The land reforms introduced by the British also resulted in wide spread discontent among the peasants. Though it is out of the purview of this study how all these changes introduced by the British affected the economy of Odisha, it is important to note that a number of zamindars lost their estates as a consequence. Besides, the changes in zamindari system also created a new class of zamindars and a number of long established khandayat zamindars lost their power in the process.

Odisha was known for its maritime affairs; the port of Pipli was functional since the seventeenth century for this purpose. There were robust shipping businesses in Balasore. The maritime trade of Odisha was affected to a great extent after the British occupation. Odisha was a centre for good quality salt; the British administration brought changes in the salt law in 1814, by which the price of salt increased six times. They also demonetized the cowrie currency. Excessive tax on land, oppressive rules of zamindars, increase in the price of salt threw the commoners into a pathetic state. The wide-spread suspicion and anger against the British rulers resulted in the paika rebellion<sup>9</sup> in 1814 led by Buxi Jagabandhu Bidyadhar.<sup>10</sup> Successfully suppressed by the British, it was a rebellious protest raised by the armed peasant class badly affected by the oppressive land laws.

The primary objective of the British East India Company was to make profit at the expense of the natives. While exploiting the natives for wealth, the colonisers also made an effort to enlighten them from a prejudiced position of superiority based on race. British missionaries were already trying to make way into the social lives of the people. They made it a point to teach the *Bible* to those who learnt to read and write from them. The Odishan society was already divided in the lines of caste, religion, gender, economic status and region. The internal contradictions, communal differences, discriminatory practices and superstitions prevalent among the natives came to their advantage. Due to the



lack of educated Odia natives, the administrative posts in offices were often filled up by Bengalis. With the spread of education, this scenario slowly changed and Odia natives got recruited in various posts, which laid the foundation of a salaried population in Odisha. The promise of a government job, no matter how petty or powerful, and the opportunities these jobs offered could have been well calculated by the commoners. The number of pupils attending school gradually increased and people started looking beyond their traditional often generational professional roles and sought salaried government jobs. This fact may be linked to the slow rise of an educated middle class in Odishan society during the nineteenth century.

During the early nineteenth century, British missionaries made an effort to educate girls in Odisha, but they hardly met with success. Missionaries were looked upon with suspicion due to the fear of conversion. In 1824, the Baptist Mission established an English Charity school for boys and girls at Cuttack. Establishment of fifteen more schools followed, and yet, total number of girl students was only 63. In 1836, a boarding school was established at Cuttack; three girls' schools were also set up in different parts of Odisha. A Middle English school for girls, first of its kind, was started at Cuttack in the same year.<sup>11</sup>

On their efforts to educate the natives and the impact they were making, a passage in *A Brief Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the Orissa Mission in 1858* reads –

During the early part of the Mission, considerable attention was paid to the subject of vernacular education, and numerous day-schools for both sexes were established. These were of necessity taught by heathen masters; but they were diligently visited by the missionaries, and especially their wives. The children were periodically examined, and thoroughly drilled in all the literature of which Christianity could boast in the province. We not unfrequently find persons even now referring to the schools in which they had been

taught, and to the various remarks made to them by such and such a Sahib, and such and such a Mem. Many received an education who otherwise would not have had one; much scriptural knowledge was diffused; and the missionaries gained an amount of influence which in the commencement of the Mission was of prime importance, and which perhaps could have been obtained in no other way. Still, however, the schools did not adequately answer the great ends for which they were established; and after years of labour and expense, much disappointment was felt that so few, almost none, of those who had been taught embraced Christianity.<sup>12</sup>

It is difficult to say how things would have progressed had Odisha not suffered the Great Famine of 1866. The famine, which took the lives of one third of Odisha's population, shook the very core of Odishan social and economic life. During this time, missionaries established orphanages for famine orphans which subsequently developed into centres of education. The missionaries also served the famine stricken natives and looked after the poorest of the poor when they were deserted by their own communities. Before the famine, there were rare instances of conversion among the natives; those who converted faced strict punishment in the form of social ostracism.

However, the post famine period saw mass conversion and establishment of large Christian settlements in Odisha. The poor, destitute and the landless, who had been hideously affected by the famine found in the missionaries supportive and compassionate souls at a time when their own tribe were prejudiced against them due to rigid social rules. Phakirmohana Senapati wrote in his autobiography that he too had mulled over converting into a Christian at a certain point in his life.<sup>13</sup> He later joined the Utkal Brahmo Samaj.<sup>14</sup> Madhusudan Das, the first Odia graduate and one of the chief architects of modern Odisha, had embraced Christianity.<sup>15</sup> Many educated men of the time began to question the values they were living by and explored alternative ideas and thoughts. They began to express stimulating thoughts and ideas

in their writing. The post famine period witnessed the emergence of printed journals in Odisha. Men of letters among the natives were deeply stirred by the events taking place around them. They displayed a sense of regional identity and self awareness. They could perceive that much loss of lives and devastations of the great famine could have been prevented had they possessed direct access to the British administration and communicated the problems beseeching them at the moment of crisis. They felt the issues of the Odias could not be communicated properly to those who were at the helm of affairs and hence the sweeping devastation across Odisha could not be prevented. *Utkal Dipika*, the first weekly Odia newspaper, was founded in 1866 with the objective of bringing to the fore burning issues concerning Odia people.<sup>16</sup> A few more journals followed suit.

While Odishan society was going through such far-reaching transformations, issues relating to girls and women also received greater attention. The journals, which were full of reportage on relief distribution and court cases relating to land disputes, did offer some space to news on women. The issue of remarrying child widows was debated so was educating women. Hence the post famine period also saw a steady rise in female literacy.

Mrs Smith, a British woman, started teaching at her home in 1869 with only six housewives. By 1872, 126 women were educated at her residence school. In 1869, Abinash Chatterjee started a girls' school at his residence at Balu bazaar, Cuttack with only six students; later the school was named Cuttack Hindu Girls' High School. The school got financial assistance from the government in 1873. That school was upgraded to a middle vernacular school in 1883. Subsequently, it turned into a famous centre for women's education in Odisha and came to be known as Ravenshaw Hindu Girls' School. Free studentship was granted to girl students with a view to increase enrolment at the school. By the end of 1873 -74, there were 7 girls' schools in Puri district and 39 girls' school in Cuttack district. However, most of the girls, who attended these schools, were from native Christian and domiciled Bengali families.

In fact, very few Odia Hindu girls attended these schools. Girls in Odia Hindu families were married off much before they attained puberty as it was commonly held that if a daughter was not thus married off, her ancestors rot in hell.<sup>17</sup> It was customary for girls to remain at home, do household chores, and look after the in-laws and carry the responsibilities of the household when they were sent there. To the age old belief against educating girls, the counter arguments were impenitently utilitarian: if girls learnt to read, they would be able to teach their children, they could keep the accounts of household expenditure, they could read the scriptures to their in-laws. Apparently, such objectives did not presuppose that the status of women would change or it would subvert the power equation in the family structure. And yet, the reluctance and indifference among the natives prevailed as far as female education was concerned.

The government revised its policy as per the resolution of 13<sup>th</sup> January 1876 to encourage girls' attendance at mixed primary schools. It also planned to establish separate girls' high schools. J.A. Hopkins<sup>18</sup> recommended for establishment of separate primary school for girls to promote girls' education in Odisha. A reward of six rupees per annum was given to village school teachers as an incentive to increase the number of girls at schools. The policy was first implemented in Puri in the year 1876-77 and there was a noticeable increase of girls in those schools. On the spread of education among women, the newsmagazine "Mayurbhanj" reported in 1880— "Now women's education is gradually progressing. The Director of General Education Department has given the annual report for last financial year, which states 114 girls' schools were established in that year. Including this, 11215 girls' schools are established in India."<sup>19</sup>

On the basis of the recommendation of Hunter Commission in 1882-83, women teachers and women school inspectors were appointed to further improve girls' enrollment. During 1882-83, total number of girls under instruction was 2416 out of which 823 attended girls' schools. There were thirty-three girls' schools



in Odisha out of which twenty-five were in Balasore, six in Cuttack district and two in Puri district. In 1889-90, Saraswati Bai was the first Odia girl to pass the Middle English scholarship examination from the town of Cuttack. Further, books were written keeping girl students in mind during this time. A primer *Balika patha*<sup>20</sup> written by Kanaka Manjari Devi was published in 1897. It included tales from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* along with chapters on general knowledge and essays on what made an ideal home maker, faithful and pious wife, and also a mention of special Odia recipes. Dinabandhu Garnayak, the editor of *Sambalpur Hitaisini* news journal, wrote a book, *Nari siksha*,<sup>21</sup> which carried practical advice for girls and women on various topics.

The Shimla Education conference in 1901 recommended for the establishment of model primary schools, training schools, and also increasing the number of staff and inspectors for schools. In 1902, missionaries set up a Frowning School for Women at Cuttack to train women primary school teachers. Despite all these initiatives, by 1905, progress of female education in Odisha was far from satisfactory due to the prevalence of purdah system, child marriage, ambivalent attitude of people towards women's education, and scarcity of educated women teachers. During the period 1905-1936, there was only one high school meant for girls at Cuttack, three English schools at Cuttack, Puri and Sambalpur and five vernacular schools. The first girls' high school at Cuttack was opened by Reba Ray<sup>22</sup> with only seven students in 1906. Subsequently, it became a full-fledged girls' school and was named as Ravenshaw Girls' High School. In 1907, the number of girls enrolled in primary and middle classes of Ravenshaw Girls' High School were 112 whereas in higher classes it was only 45. It may be noted that in 1905, the overall literacy percentage of Odisha was only 2.43% in comparison to 12% in India.<sup>23</sup>

In 1908-1909, Ravenshaw Hindu Girls' School was upgraded into a Girls' High School. Two Odia girls named Chandramukhi Sarangi and Narmada Kar passed Matriculation from this school in 1910. Interestingly, Chandramukhi Sarangi (1894-1972) was the

granddaughter of Gangadhar Sarangi, the first Odia to convert to Christianity on 23 March, 1828.<sup>24</sup> Narmada Kar (1893-1980), regarded as the first Odia woman graduate, hailed from a middle class Brahmo family. Her father, Biswanath Kar was the renowned editor of the journal, “Utkal Sahitya”. The government of Bihar and Odisha appointed the Female Education Committee by the resolution No. 128E, dated 08.06.1914 for the promotion of female education. During 1915-16, intermediate art classes were opened in Ravenshaw Girls’ High School, Cuttack. At the intermediate level, the year 1924-25 saw nine students,<sup>25</sup> whereas this number was only three in 1915-16.

In order to provide girls vocational education and skill, an industrial section was opened at Mission Girls’ school at Cuttack in 1920. During this period, two institutions in Cuttack— Hindu Women’s Institute and Training School—were managed by the Baptist Missionary Society with substantial aid from the government.

In 1930, five women took admission in Ravenshaw College, which was a milestone in the history of women’s education in Odisha. In 1936, only 4 post-graduate women students were there at Ravenshaw College. Recalling her experience of student life at Ravenshaw College in 1932, Sukriti Mohapatra writes:

We were only three girls in BA. The present generation of girls can’t imagine how we few girl students managed amidst such a huge number of boys at the college. We would enter the class when the teacher entered and sit in a bench to his right meant for us. When the class was over, boys would flow out of the house in a stream. We would stand close to the wall out of diffidence. We felt as though we were a small boat in the infinite sea.<sup>26</sup>

To speed up the spread of higher education among women, Ravenshaw Girls’ High School was upgraded to a degree college in 1946 and was named Shoilabala Women’s College. It was the first and only women’s college in Odisha during the pre-independence era.

The progress of higher education among women took years and years to reach a satisfactory stage in Odisha. Women from garjat regions lagged behind as the British administration focused more on the coastal region like Puri, Cuttack and Balasore. Though nearly thirty percent of Odisha's population is tribal, they remained a neglected lot as far as basic education was concerned. Nevertheless, the relentless efforts of missionaries, government and eminent persons of Odisha brought about significant rise in the number of educated women. The liberal donations of kings and rich landlords also greatly contributed to the cause. The contribution of social reformers and thinkers like Sribatsa Panda, Bairagi Charan Mishra, Gouri Sankar Ray, Madhusudan Das, Phakirmohana Senapati, Biswanath Kar, Shoila Bala Das and Reba Ray was no less remarkable.

### III

#### **The Writing Women in Early Twentieth Century Odisha**

The twentieth century Odisha was a time of great social and political upheaval. It offered a fertile soil for new ideas to take root and grow. The growth of a national consciousness as well as the desire for a regional identity among the Odias gave way to several changes in the attitude towards existing ideas. The availability of Odia journals and books, thanks to the establishment of printing presses, also created a reading public, small in number but influential nevertheless as participants in the discussions concerning social reformations. The journals, in particular, were instrumental in bringing out diverse viewpoints from among the Odia speaking people.

The external influences on society were apparent in the socio-cultural space; the literature produced during that period prominently reflected them in form and content. Women characters became the centre of stories and novels published in journals during this period. Phakirmohana Senapati's portrayal of an assertive wife beating her husband with a broomstick to cure him of addiction

in “Patent Medicine”,<sup>27</sup> Reba Ray’s portrayal of a mother, who was manipulative and saw her will fulfillment more important than her son’s conjugal happiness in “Sannyasi”<sup>28</sup> – such varied images of women were found in the literature produced in this period.

In Upendra Kishore Das’ *Malaajabna* (1928), an adolescent girl married off to a widower double her age could only think in protest:

Just because we are daughters, we seem like a burden! The groom may be old, ugly and wicked – you tie your daughter to him as if she is an object and heave a sigh of relief that your duties are over! All you worry about is that your daughter should get enough to eat! Nobody ever bothers to ask her about how she feels.<sup>29</sup>

The novels of Kuntala Kumari Sabat (1901-1938) depicted the precarious condition of women as well as their attempts to overcome the constraints thrust upon them. Her major novels written between 1922 and 1928 offered realistic pictures of the lives of women in Odisha. Her *Kali bobu* (The Dark Wife) is a social novel which veers round the theme of child marriage. Lakshmi becomes a widow at the age of ten. When she thinks about her life, she is filled with anger against the social practice forced on her:

Why is she living such a lonely, helpless life and continue to live in this world? Why are all pleasures of the world forbidden to her? Why is she bereft of the life of a wife or a mother? Which sin she committed to endure such hellish suffering? Lakshmi thought of this day and night but she could not understand anything. Who was she married to? Who was her husband? Who is asking her to lead a chaste life? She would think of all this when she sat alone near the village pond.<sup>30</sup>

In her social comedy, *Na tundi* (The nine-tongued woman), Ratani is known as a quarrelsome girl in her village, but she married a reformist landlord because of her courageous personality. Gradually, she transformed herself into a dynamic social worker dedicating

herself to the cause of women. In *Parasamani* (The Touchstone), Lalita is a housewife enduring the torture of her mother-in-law and sister-in-law quietly. *Raghu Arakshita* (Raghu, the Orphan) tells the story of a woman who could not conceive a child in the first eight years of her marriage. As a result she had to become a victim of domestic violence and abuse. Her husband thought of marrying a second time. Her heart was filled with suppressed anger:

The lord has created man and woman with two hands, two eyes, and two ears. Why then the fate of a woman lies under a slab of stone and the fate of a man lies under a leaf? She could not find a convincing answer. She thought it was her bad karma from some previous birth. If somebody committed sin in previous birth, they took birth as women in the present birth.<sup>31</sup>

Born into a third generation Christian family in Burma, Kuntala Kumari was taught at Ravenshaw Girls' School and Cuttack Medical School. As a medical practitioner, she wrote a long treatise, "Antudisalaré anachara" in 1922, describing the unhygienic and life-threatening situations women underwent during child birth.<sup>32</sup> A tireless worker for the uplift of the women, the poor and the neglected, she embodied the contradictory spirits of the age in which she lived and expressed them eloquently in her poems and novels. So immense was her influence on her readers, the British Government banned her long patriotic poem "Ahwana" in 1930. Much before she died of child birth at the age of thirty-seven, she was widely regarded as a torch bearer of women's emancipation in Odisha.

The turbulent time witnessed a number of women writing and publishing their writings in journals. The climate of devaluation of women persisted even amidst such changes; despite that the first quarter of the twentieth century produced an impressive number of writing women.<sup>33</sup> Writers such as Reba Ray, Narmada Kar, Suprabha Kar, and Annapurna Patnaik wrote regularly in leading literary journals such as *Utkal Sahitya*, *Asha*, *Mukur*, and *Sabakar*.

The hope of change and enthusiasm reflected in their writings was in stark contrast to the pervasive cynicism – nevertheless, a new reality was taking on a vague shape.

At this time, women also started editing literary journals. Reba Ray edited *Asha* which regularly published essays on the importance of women's education. *Paricharika*,<sup>34</sup> a journal published during 1917-1920 and edited by Basanta Kumari Devi exclusively carried writings by women writers. Around fifty women writers contributed to it on various themes; regular contributors among them included: Kokila Devi, Chandramani Dei, Sarojini Das, Durga Devi, Nihar Nalini Das, Pramila Sundari Devi, Ratnabala Devi, Shreemati, Sarala Sundari Devi, Sarojini Dasi and Hema Nalini Devi.

While struggling to reconcile their desire for self-expression when the demands of society required them to be silent and self-effacing, these women writers must have felt in themselves an irrepressible urge to express themselves through writing and take part in the debates about women and their social roles. In much of the writings of Kuntala Kumari Sabat, Sitadevi Khadanga, and Sarala Devi an early feminist consciousness could be clearly perceived. They not only wrote with a quiet confidence but also tried to effect change in the societal attitude through their dynamism.

It may be noted here that women's writing in Odia dated back to fifteenth century. Quite a number of women wrote during the medieval period and included such figures as Madhavi Dasi<sup>35</sup>, Brindavati Dasi,<sup>36</sup> Nisanka Ray Rani,<sup>37</sup> Narendra Nari<sup>38</sup>, Rani Mohan Kumari,<sup>39</sup> and Bishnupriya Dei,<sup>40</sup> but they mostly wrote devotional poems, derivative in nature.<sup>41</sup> It was only during the early decades of twentieth century that Odia women writers began writing on cultural, political and ideological issues. This body of writings was significant from a historical perspective – writing with a background of discouragement, it must have taken enormous faith for these women to declare that they possessed and could suitably use their creative and intellectual faculties. Writing for these early women

writers became not only a means of self-expression but also of self-fulfillment. They reveled in their new found confidence. What most of them normally did not acknowledge in this period was that they wrote because they were ambitious or vying for recognition for their work. A handful among them, however, displayed a creative spirit which was independent of the social milieu they were part of. They celebrated the uninhibited joys of being alive. They were honest, articulate and did not shy away from giving their opinion on issues that concerned them.

#### IV

### **Women in Public Space in Twentieth Century Odisha**

With the progress of education and opening of girls' schools, a small number of women joined the work space. In general, however, the public space remained dominated by men. The opposition against the British was gaining strength all over India. With the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian National Congress had massive ideological and organisational make over. His ideals of non-violence and non-cooperation had created immense curiosity and eagerness among the Odia nationalists. Mahatma Gandhi visited Odisha for the first time on 23 March 1921. He spoke to a small gathering of around forty women at Binod Bihari before addressing a public meeting on the bank of river Kathajodi. A number of women became members of the Congress and joined Gandhi on his foot march. Ramadevi Choudhury and Hiramani Devi<sup>42</sup> attended the Gaya session of Indian National Congress in 1922. The Calcutta session of National Congress in December 1928 was represented by Ramadevi Choudhury, Sarala Devi, Sarojini Choudhury, Jahnavi Devi, Kokila Devi, Rasamani Devi from Odisha.

The salt satyagraha marked the beginning of a true political career for Odia women, bringing into limelight a large number of women leaders. Inchudi of Balasore district and Kujanga of Jagatsinghpur district were two important centres of salt satyagraha where women played a crucial role. More than fifteen hundred



women took part in the salt satyagraha at Inchudi on 20<sup>th</sup> April 1930 under the leadership of Ramadevi Choudhury.<sup>43</sup> In May, 1930, more than five hundred women joined the salt satyagraha of Kujanga at the call of Bhagyabati Pata Mahadei, the queen of Kujanga.

Feminist scholar Geraldine Forbes<sup>44</sup> has argued that women had arrived in the public space before Gandhi, it could be true but partially in the Odishan context. The scale of public participation, the display of self-awareness among women, the debates on women's issues came into focus as never before during the freedom movement. At the same time, the questions around women's participation in public sphere had an emphasis on the social than individual identity. The questions of autonomy, agency, individuality and above all independent identity of women slowly found their way as women grew aware of their self-worth through education and exposure. By the time India gained independence, women pioneers in Odisha were seen in various roles which had been traditionally ascribed only to men. These women had the memories of growing up during a period of great change, having a regional identity<sup>45</sup> experiencing the euphoria of gaining freedom from the colonizers, witnessing the early days of nation building and nurturing a hope for a new social order. They had laid the foundation on which the women who were born after independence grew and became part of the changes taking place in the third and fourth quarter of the twentieth century in Odisha.

## V

### **The Memory Makers**

When Sitadevi Khadanga (1901-1983) wrote her autobiography in 1978, she was already at the fag end of her life. Growing up in the early part of twentieth century in Ganjam, she had a successful career as a playwright which bestowed on her enviable popularity. By the time Ramadevi Choudhury (1899-1985) published her

autobiography, she was deeply revered as a freedom fighter and social worker in Odisha. A women's college in Bhubaneswar was established in her name in 1969. Bina Dei (1904-2003) published her autobiography when she was ninety-seven years and had already enjoyed a glorious career as a doctor. When Godavari Devi (1916-1993) remembered the trauma and humiliation faced by her in her memoir and how she stood against her whole village to go to attend a women's camp in Puri, readers were on her side.

The Odia women autobiographers who have put on paper their personal narratives saw a society getting free from its rigid moral and social codes and giving space to new ways of living. They lived through the first days of a nation in making as well as witnessed the period of disillusionment with the new political order afterwards. While adapting to the changing value system, they retained some traditional values, imbibed a number of modern values, which in a way laid the foundation for a new social reality. They also knew how to handle malicious criticism and how to stand by their conviction against stiff opposition. They were unafraid of unfavorable public opinion. For those who were born during the independence of India or grew up through the sixties and seventies, the gates of higher education were open and welcoming, and public space no longer a taboo. They reaped the rewards of their predecessors and moved with spontaneity and vision. More and more women were seen in the public space and found to express their view points on a wide range of subjects. So, in this context, what could be the impulse that prompted a handful of women to imagine themselves as autobiographical subjects? By witnessing how far lives of women changed and coming into contact with a world which respected them for who they were, they might have felt the need to record their own life stories and to present a coherent narrative of their lives. Most of them, if not all, were clearly aware that their lives were part of women's history, that they as women did experience structural discrimination and systemic devaluation, but by rising above the constraints they successfully paved the way on which the future generation of women could walk with dignity.

Most of the women autobiographers discussed here offer explanations relating to what led them to write their autobiographies. One of the reasons for the authors justifying their decision to write their life stories could be attributed to a certain degree of self-consciousness experienced while laying bare the facts of their lives. Statements as to why they undertook to write their life-stories range from the concern with the need to spread Gandhiji's message and his impact on their lives as in case of Gandhians to a desire for fame or simply to reminisce about lost time. In Ramadevi Choudhury's words:

I was requested by Sarala Devi, my cousin (a leader of the freedom movement in Odisha and well-known writer) to write the story of my life.

What should I write? I replied.

I spent the first fifteen years of my life with my parents, like any other girl. When I got married and came to live with my husband and his parents, I had to busy myself looking after the household and bringing up my children. Of course, it may be of interest and of some use to young women, who have only a little education, like me, to know how I regulated my life and prepared myself for public life in the midst of my domestic responsibilities. They may see from my life that one can serve one's country and society by cultivating one's inner qualities even if one does not have any formal education. But then how many really care to read the lives of even great men and who would care for the story of an insignificant person like me? And yet, I bowed to Sarala Devi's wish and here is my story.<sup>46</sup>

Like Ramadevi, many other share their experiences so that others might know how they lived in a different period of time. What is discernible in all these cases is how their personalities differed though they had been shaped under same influences and same epoch. The rebellious spirit of Bina Dei and Sarala Devi contrast the accommodative nature of many of the autobiographers. They

offer diverse perspectives to look at women's position in society as well as their expectations from their lives and the society they lived in. It is also important not to underestimate the basic temperament of an individual while evaluating them against the principles for which they stood. Their explanations, nevertheless, offer the reader a way of approaching their books, and quite possibly, a way of understanding their lives.

The twenty women autobiographers studied here could be grouped under five broad categories on the basis of how they have projected themselves in their narratives: Gandhians, activists, writers, professionals and chroniclers. Such categories, needless to mention, often overlap and the margin of classification blurs.

#### **a. Gandhians**

Education system paved the way for some women to liberate themselves partially from the constraints that had traditionally held them within the four walls. However, women's participation in the public space varied from place to place in British India at any point of time. The advent of the freedom struggle brought about far-reaching transformations in women's lives. Participation in the freedom movement, especially after its character was transformed by Gandhian techniques of non-cooperation, altered the lives of a large number of women in Odisha and brought them into contact with a new world. Many of them broke purdah, took part in the activities carried out in the public sphere. Some of them went to jail, worked for the weaker and despised sections of society, thus violating caste norms and taboos and took leadership roles which no one had ever dreamed they could assume. This constituted an unmistakable turning point in their lives. It is, therefore, not surprising that some of these brave women chronicled the story of their struggle against not only the British rule, but also against the oppressive norms of a feudalistic, caste-ridden society that would have liked to keep them confined to the sphere of domesticity.

While reading their autobiographies, one is freshly struck by the liberating effect of Gandhi's ideas upon women. Gandhi

broadened their horizons beyond all expectations. He woke them out of the stupor of contended domesticity, revealed to them new horizons and helped them towards the understanding of a nation. Providing as they do parallel stories on British India and Gandhi, these also offer uncanny insights into and unusual perspectives on the spread of nationalism in Odisha.

Gandhi's visit to Odisha and foot march across various places has been recorded in detail by a number of freedom fighters and historians. Women freedom fighter could be seen in the role of organisers and fund collectors during the foot march. Of Gandhi's meeting at Cuttack, Ramadevi Choudhury writes in her autobiography:

Gandhiji made a very short speech in which he exhorted women to give up wearing ornaments and donate these for the cause of the freedom movement. Some made cash donations. I had taken with me a bundle of yarn spun on an unsteady spinning wheel at home. My mother-in-law had warned me against offering any ornaments to Gandhiji even if he asked for them. As usual I heeded her advice and did not donate any of my ornaments. When I offered Gandhiji the bundle of yarn, he gave me a look—a strange, deep look, which still haunts me.<sup>47</sup>

Responding to the call of Gandhi, many Odia women gave up lives of luxury and led a simple life dedicated to the service of the nation. Autobiographies of these Gandhian women tell the exciting story of women stepping into the public sphere which had hitherto remained out of bounds for them in response to Gandhi's call for civil disobedience. Their narratives may be thought of as part of the revolution in self-awareness exemplified in Gandhi and the independence movement. Gandhi nowhere seemed so intensely human as when Annapurna Maharana remembers the moment she first sets her eyes on the Mahatma in her autobiography, *Amruta anubhav* (An Experience of Bliss). For those who concern themselves with the emotional impact of Gandhi upon a sensitive

adolescent girl, Annapurna moves to the centre of the scene. In her own words:

I was dashing out to control the crowd, when I heard an old man calling out affectionately from behind in Hindi—"Hey girl! Where are you running?"

I turned back and saw Gandhi resting under a tree. A lantern burnt feebly by his side. An English lady wearing khadi, and another person were busy doing something.

"To control the crowd." I replied boastfully.

He gave a toothless smile and said, "All right, go on."

Isn't there an expression in English—"love at first sight?" This was precisely what happened to me at that instant. A few words and a smile—it seemed as though we had known each other for ages—Gandhi became my most intimate, special friend.<sup>48</sup>

Women left their homes, went to jail, picketed in front of liquor shops, toured villages and town mobilising support for the freedom movement. They took part in constructive programmes like abolition of untouchability, spinning, and revival of cottage industries. The Gandhian dictum was not limited to raising voice against the British but also raising voice against the prevalent orthodoxy and superstitions. Simply put, Gandhi's emphasis on change was threefold – at the social level, Gandhians opposed social evils such as caste discriminations, untouchability etc; at the political level, their fight was against the British, and at the personal level, they sought spiritual evolution through purification of thought and simple living.

Gandhi challenged the prevalent status quo and subjugation of women and wrote relentlessly against it. He linked the idea of independence with women's self-reliance and wrote regularly and extensively on women's issues.<sup>49</sup> At his call, women lived in ashrams, followed an austere life style, respected manual labour and strove to bring change among the mass through their example. Gandh's

ideals of self transformation were not only to step out of the house, but to dive within oneself. Gandhians believed in the value of self reliance and cultivating the power of choice – choosing what is good and abstaining from evil. Under Gandhi's influence, all these women became *satyagrahi* – the seeker of truth.

Ramadevi Choudhury and Sarala Devi, hailing from upper-class educated families had the support of their families to join the freedom struggle. On the other hand, stepping out of home for Godavari Devi, who belonged to a poor family in a village, had been traumatic as her narrative, *Punya smrutiru kbiye* (Sacred Memories) reveals:

I was dumb-struck and I kept myself to myself. However, I had not given up, though I had become an object of everyone's contempt and ridicule. At the same time, I could not figure out how I would be able to go to Puri. I found myself completely at loss. But I had got to go. I was now pitted against my family and nearly the whole village.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast, Ramadevi Choudhury's early life in an aristocratic, educated family led her into the movement. A housewife at a lawyer's house, she was also a keen observer of the changing social and political scene in British India. Her account provides a unique record of the times, which is interesting in its own right. She recalls in *Jeeran pathe* (Journey of Life):

I saw the dire poverty that prevailed in villages in that area... At mealtimes, children in large numbers, who were brought in by their parents, were made to sit in rows...The plantain and lotus leaves in the area, which were used as leaf plates, were exhausted long before the stock of rice ran out...People used all sorts of bamboo baskets covered with cloth to take food. They ate even from cement floors washed clean. None of us brought back the spare clothes that we had taken with us. This was the condition of people in villages in Odisha at the end of the First World War.<sup>51</sup>



The autobiographies of Ramadevi Choudhury and Annapurna Maharana display their awareness of the wider situation prevailing India, and their actual observation of facts of life and society in Odisha. In this context, a close analysis of Annapurna Das' personal narrative reminds the reader of the fact that her basic preoccupations always extended far beyond politics. Hers was a soul seeking harmony within herself as expressed in these lines:

When I was a child, I would become absentminded looking at the riot of colours at the sunset sky. I would experience a melancholy joy while gazing at the setting sun. No one had any share in the feelings that filled me in these moments. How would I get an opportunity to go through such experiences in Kuansa? We used to go to river Salandi to take bath. I saw the beds of *kasatandi* flowers stretching along the riverbank; a police station lay below the embankment...

I would visit the riverbank every day, stand alone and watch the sunset. When darkness fell, I would come back home.<sup>52</sup>

With her, the Gandhian search for truth takes on a whole new dimension and transcends the merely political.

## **b. Activists**

In the post independence era, many embraced socialist and communist vision and methods of social change. The issues of the weaker section of the society such as women, farmer, labourers, tribals were taken up by activists and debated at various forums to introduce new policies. Nirupama Rath (1926 - 2011), a gynecologist in her own right, took part in movements since she was a student. Her memoir titled *Alibha smruti, abhula anubhuti* (Eternal Memories, Unforgettable Experiences) foregrounds her involvement and belief in social movements and developmental initiatives. She says:

Even as a child my blood used to boil like larva flowing from a volcano whenever I heard the helpless cries of the poor. My mind and body remain active, and has helped the

revolutionary spirit grow within me against social injustice, suffering, and exploitation. As a result, I have got drawn into various mass movements – students’ and women’s movements, and movements of the poor, the exploited, and the unlettered.<sup>53</sup>

Sumani Jhodia’s oral narrative reveals the hard struggle of tribals, who make nearly thirty percent of Odisha’s population. Poverty and illiteracy are prevalent among the tribes even after the passing of seventy-five years of independence. The hard struggle of Sumani Jhodia to assert the rights of her community against oppression finds memorable expression in her account of life, *Muin Sumani kabuche* (Sumani Speaks). The following gives a glimpse of her life as an activist:

We marched to Tikri Police Station in a procession. Who is right? Who is wrong? Why should women start an agitation? We said, See, if you don’t take any action against that man, if you don’t send him to jail, we would demolish the police station, said we, the women. The men were too scared to say anything to Andhari-ma. Thus our organisation helped women who were victims of violence. We worked to ease difficult situations and demanded justice.<sup>54</sup>

Her account of her struggle is a painful reminder that the theatre of the battle for justice in which the Gandhian women were engaged before independence has shifted to the tribal world after the attainment of independence.

### c. Writers

Sitadevi Khadanga’s autobiography, *Mora jeevan smruti* (Reminiscences) was published in 1978. Whether she was conscious of her historical role when she wrote her life story from her sick-bed is not known, but she writes with remarkable honesty:

I pay homage to my Guru and set out to write down some incidents from my life. I have not done noble deeds which are worth recording; but I am constantly spurred on by a

strong desire as I lie on my sick-bed. Human beings always crave popularity and fame. A similar craving motivates me to pick up the pen and set down my memories. I find myself helpless before this desire. So I sit down to write a few chapters of my insignificant life.<sup>55</sup>

Writing seemed to have become an act which fulfilled her being; she articulates her self-consuming passion for writing in the following passage:

How enthusiastically I used to write plays! I would write till dawn in order to complete a play. The actors would read it and discuss it to tell me if any elaboration or tightening or omission was needed at some places. The next day, I would incorporate their suggestions into the play and complete rewriting it in two, three days. I felt indescribably happy at my creation. I felt like rolling at the feet of the Almighty. While writing, my mind would be animated with all kinds of ideas. Now, when I remember those days, my mind no longer dances in excitement. I fold my hands in quiet sadness, spontaneously, and raise them towards the divine power.<sup>56</sup>

Aparna Devi (1898-1963), Sitadevi's contemporary and one of the earliest of distinguished women poets, started translating her favourite poems before she started writing poems herself. However, recognition was hard to come her way and not without exacting a price. She notes:

After its publication, *Indumati* was severely criticised. So I stopped writing for a while. But I thought to myself that if I gave up the search for truth fearing criticism, it would only fuel criticism; but if I adhered to truth, it would surely be accepted one day. So I set to work on writing *Chinta*, *Kabitanjali*, *Ariyalalana* and the rest.<sup>57</sup>

No matter how different their sensibilities or upbringing, the desire to express themselves through writing from an early age was common among the women who went on to establish themselves

as writers, and one often finds them fondly recollecting the growth of creative spirit within themselves. Pratibha Satpathy traces the growth of her poetic self in her memoir, *Saisabaru sansar* (Of Innocence and Experience). The pragmatic steps Gita Hota took as the editor of a literary magazine to achieve success in a competitive market are matter-of-factly recorded in the following passage from her memoir, *Sabu smruti madhura* (Sweet Memories):

To get an advertisement, one has to run to an office four, five times, and again to receive payment one has to run two, three times. So, from an advertisement worth one thousand rupees we actually get seven hundred rupees. Sometimes one has to please people in various ways to get this work done. Above all, advertisement is a respectable business at national level, but in Odisha, it destroys your sense of self-respect.<sup>58</sup>

Pitambari Devi was a writer in her own right and helped Gopal Chandra Praharaj in the capacity of an editor. She assisted her brother-in-law, Gopal Chandra Praharaj in collecting Odia folklore and compiling a monumental seven volume dictionary. She recounts her life as a young widow and her unusual relationship with her famous brother-in-law in her unfinished memoir titled, *Dukha kabibi na sukha kabibi* (Shall I tell you of my sorrows or of my joys).

#### **d. Professionals**

During the Gandhian movement, women who worked in public sphere were mostly inspired by ideals of sacrifice and selfless service. The notion of women taking up salaried jobs, earning for the family were still not encouraged. Economic independence of women had the potential of upsetting the power equation in families; this also pitted women against men as competitors. The work space remained populated by men. Literate women fulfilled the role of home tutors by teaching their children at home and hardly anything beyond that. The financial responsibilities of the family rested on men. In Odisha, most of the women at the workspace, though their number was not high, were Christians and

Bengalis. In this context, the choice of profession becomes a key defining moment in Bina Dei's life, the first Odia Hindu woman doctor from Odisha. She offers in her autobiography, *Akinchanara jeevan smruti* (Autobiography of a Nobody) a moving account of how difficult it was for a girl to receive higher education even when she belonged to a highly educated family:

I cried most of the time as no arrangements could be made regarding our studies. Jyotsna remained indifferent in this matter. I gave up hope and tried to commit suicide. Mother informed my father of this in a letter. I even contemplated embracing Christianity in order to continue my studies.<sup>59</sup>

She was allowed a formal education only when she threatened to commit suicide. Later, she completed studies in medicine and, by taking up a profession same as her father's, she showed that daughters could continue the family tradition, an honour, which was earlier reserved exclusively for the sons of the family. The following passage brings home to readers how seriously she took her first job as a doctor in Dufferin hospital in Champaran—

Instead of sleeping inside my quarters, I would sleep in the veranda all through the night. Lest any emergency case might come in the night, if a nurse came to call me, and I might not be able to hear her. I did not even change into nightwear as I feared I might get late while changing dress before going to the hospital.<sup>60</sup>

Women stepping out of home to earn a livelihood and achieve something through their talent were still not favoured during that time. Though this scenario has changed and the society is now open to the idea of women taking up jobs, this has resulted in other complexities. The hardships endured by a working woman and the complex negotiations she has to enter into are presented memorably in many of the reminiscences. Through opting for a salaried job, Pratibha Satpathy confesses how she could stabilise her precarious financial condition, which enabled her to devote more time to creative pursuits. In her case, “earning one's living is not an

end in itself, but it is the only way to achieve a securely based inner independence.”<sup>61</sup> Pratibha Ray chronicles her husband’s attitude towards her job and how harried she felt while balancing her work with family obligations.

#### e. Chroniclers

In some of the narratives discussed here, the authors seem to be writing about people they came in contact with and experiences which left a deep impact on them than about themselves. On closer observation, however, one may find, while describing these people and experiences, they were actually engaged in writing about themselves. They discovered, to their delight, the traces of others’ personalities within them as they traversed through life. Memories of their loved ones acted as a beacon through their lives as they brought their ancestors to life blowing off the film of dust laid on them by time.

Durgabati Tripathy adheres to the autobiographical mode to describe the life of her mother-in-law which she had heard from her in her memoir, *Suneli smrutira surabhi* (Golden Memories). This invites comparison with Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.<sup>62</sup> Stein actually writes through Alice’s persona about her own life in Paris and her friendship with Picasso and Hemingway. Durgabati could have drawn her mother-in-law’s portrait by referring to her in the third person as she does with her other family members; instead, she employs the subjective mode to tell the story of an individual who seemed to have left the deepest impact on her.

In a similar vein, celebrating the friendship between her mother with her neighbour, Rama Devi brilliantly evokes a lost world in her memoir, *Para padartha* (One Who Belongs to Another):

My mother and aunt were friends for eighty long years. No one except God could come between them. Mother passed away exactly two years after Aunt’s death. She must have met her, awaiting her, on an evening in Ashwina. Who knows where the streams of the Ganga and that of Yamuna met,

in heaven or on the earth, and again created another holy confluence.<sup>63</sup>

The bond of friendship between women such as this is rarely explored in self-narratives as the focus often remains on familial ties. A poignant description of a bond between two sisters is found in Sanghamitra Mishra's memoir in which she recreates the sad life of her elder sister, who is a part of her own emotional make-up. She says:

My elder sister was more like a second mother to me than a friend. I never could measure her love for me nor can I ever be able to do so. I felt sad when she left home to work at the Khadi Board when I was still a child. I thought I would no longer be able to go out holding her hand. I would no longer be able to learn singing from her. Father would surely be angry at me while teaching me. Who would comfort me then?<sup>64</sup>

Reminiscences such as these relate to the formative influences and lasting impressions of one's life. In her brief but evocatively written memoir, *Smrutira surabhi* (Fragrance of Memories), Mandakini Das presents pen-portraits of people she loved dearly. Her recollection actually becomes a journey of self discovery as these lines reveal:

I would also listen to *mahamantras* being chanted. Gradually, these started to have a deep impact upon my mind and illuminated my inner world. I could not understand the import of all this at that time. I got married at an early age, which I thought was god's will...I don't remember what gifts I received from whom, nor do I have the gifts with me today. But what I received from my uncle was immeasurably precious.<sup>65</sup>

A refreshing contrast to such sombre musings over one's life's experiences is provided by Snehalata Mohapatra's memories of her carefree childhood days in *Mo piladina* (My Childhood). The



act of memory is freed of the oppressive need for self-justification; the pleasure of relieving the past becomes its own reward:

I would slink into Anadi babu's garden and pick a lot of flowers. Luckily, I was never caught doing this. It would have been so embarrassing if I had been. People would have said—"Rama-master's daughter was a thief." This would have been even more embarrassing than the disgrace one had to face when one was uninterested in one's studies.<sup>66</sup>

Such playful events were but few and these women often experienced a reality which was hard and discriminatory. On the precarious lives the women were made to lead, Sitadevi Khadanga has this to say:

If the parents of girls like my Heera aunt had educated their daughters and had given them in marriage to suitable grooms, their lives would have been so different. They only gave them names such as Heera and Mukta, which meant diamond and pearl. But these women were treated as if they were no better than clods of earth.<sup>67</sup>

Shouldering household responsibilities from an early age, living among in-laws and carrying the burden of providing a male heir who would continue the family line, there remains hardly any scope for free thinking or operation of individual will for women. Daily living was like walking on a tight rope. Ramadevi Choudhury dwells on her mental condition after she went to live in her in-laws' house at the age of fifteen:

I realised that acting on my mother's advice was not so simple. I would have to give up my personal comforts and wishes if I were to satisfy all these people. The only task that would matter in my life would be to make them happy. The fortnight seemed to have added several years to my age. All my childlike thoughts disappeared. The only thought that bothered me was what I should do to please every one of them. I could not even know when my likes and dislikes about food, clothes etcetera ceased to matter.<sup>68</sup>

Elsewhere, Durgabati Tripathy's mother-in-law, as a very young girl on being married to a man thrice her age recalls:

A Bengali woman who lived in our neighbourhood had come to attend my wedding. She remarked—"Ah! Such a beautiful daughter! She looks like a goddess! How could you offer her to an old man, and that, too, one who lives in a village? How could you do this, sister? I'd have throttled her had she been my own daughter, but would never have given her in marriage to such a man."

My aunt sighed—"It's her fate! Does a man ever grow old? A woman is deemed old after she gives birth to a child!"<sup>69</sup>

In a society, where one's life decisions were taken by the elders of one's family, one who refused to confirm to established notions of grace and propriety and hierarchies based on caste or gender risked disapproval of society. Annapurna Das writes of others' censure of her rational outlook:

Once I touched my forehead with my hands to show respect to Koili nani, a radhi woman (she was a child-widow, aged and was familiar to everyone in our house) when my leg touched her body. Other women, who were present there, remarked, "Annapurna is a Chandi. She's utterly ignorant about the ways of the world."

"God also exists in her. She's as old as my parents' age. What's wrong if I show my respect to her?" What I said made everyone laugh.<sup>70</sup>

Caught between the demands of tradition and the changes taking place in Odisha, the first generation of women, who had the support of Mahatma Gandhi, came out of home and took leadership roles. The introduction of formal education and opening of opportunities in the professional sphere broadened women's expectations from life as in case of Bina Dei, Radha Devi, Nirupama Rath, Pratibha Ray, Pratibha Satpathy and others. Their accounts show their sincere attempt to carve a space for themselves

in a domain, which for ages had remained monopolised by men. Bina Dei's narrative may be read as the record of a triumph over opposition; at the same time, her high seriousness as a doctor might have been a result of her intense fear of being laughed at or insecurity arising from a need to prove her worth as a woman.

Women's stepping out of the domestic space was and still remains an exhausting process involving a balancing between the private and public spheres. However, Sitadevi's attempt to set up a theatre in Ganjam points to the space a woman was allowed to if she was strong enough to take the risk. Such ventures by women were mocked, scorned at, but at the same time, appreciated by a section of society that was making every effort to imbibe new, progressive ideas. Of the applause and accolades Sitadevi received, she recalls:

On the last day, I was felicitated by its intellectuals at a public meeting. The citation was written in a simple and heart-touching language; it was printed on a sheet of paper and framed beautifully. I felt overwhelmed while responding to the felicitation.<sup>71</sup>

Women who witnessed or participated in the freedom movement were not only aware about the public space, they also concerned themselves with the changes overtaking the country in the early decades of the twentieth century. Autobiographies of Ramadevi Choudhury and Annapurna Maharana provide readers their responses to and observations of events unfolding in the public sphere. Women such as Sumani Jhodia and Nirupama Rath became part of the change affecting their lives. However, in many instances, the recent autobiographers appear to lack the passion and commitment of their predecessors to reshape the world around them. Such lack of engagement and vision about the public space where women work may be interpreted as an extension of the tradition of confirming to rules and operating within limits.

## Conclusion

The importance of personal narratives as alternative forms of social history cannot be underestimated. In this respect, the historical value of women's personal narratives in Odia should never be lost sight of. Enabled by acute powers of observation, some of them described complex situations that are extremely revealing with regard to socio-cultural history. The confusions and contradictions of their age find the highest expression in their life narratives; at the same time, societal values, hierarchies and structures are tested and society's latent conflicts are brought to the fore. Describing situations that uncover unsuspected and neglected dimensions of history, their narratives offer rich insights into Odishan society and culture as their private memory gets transformed into public memory.

The personal narratives discussed here reflect their milieu and historical situation in terms of all the aspirations, which they tried to gather up within themselves. Looking out on the world from a backwater of India and by concentrating on a feudal world undergoing change, these personal narratives help readers construct a social history of Odisha and understand the way change and external agencies affected lives of Odia women. Unfettered by the expectations of the society at large, their voices are filled with positive and believable resistance even while maintaining the dignity demanded by their different roles. The social life led by the womenfolk and their comments and innuendoes provide rich insight into the cultural and social practices of Odisha and take us into the very heart of its tradition. In the narrative of Sumani, one finds an oral history of a tribe, a fascinating account of the tribal world and the intervention and impact of developmental agencies on their lives.

The accounts of women's remembered lives are now widely seen as particularly complex expressions of "critical memory"<sup>72</sup>, thought and sensibility as their narratives arise not so much

from the raw materials of past experience, but more from their understanding of things seen, felt or imagined. Mandakini Das's remark takes the reader into the heart of the matter:

It seems the past lies like the steps one leaves behind while climbing a staircase. So memories acquire significance when they resurface in the mind. These refresh one's body and mind. When one feels worried and helpless, memories caress one's body and ask one to have patience. Old age connotes a period of waiting. Solaced by memories, my troubled life grows tranquil for some moments.<sup>73</sup>

Distanced from the actual events, these autobiographers seem to remember their past with a degree of objectivity and affection as they seek to reconstruct the past through recollection. In the passage from life to writing, these women sensibly adopted multiple strategies when confronting their world and constructing self-images. At times, one may discern an insistence on respectability at the expense of candour in their narratives. Yet, one can hear their distinctive voices as they bring out the nuances of their stories while offering memorable portraits of themselves having imbibed the spirit and aspirations of their times and being bruised and reshaped by them. By shedding light on periods of change and on the broader patterns of women's experience in Odisha during the last two centuries, these show through Sitadevi Khadanga to the most recent autobiography, the path women have traversed and how they overcame the cultural, political and financial impediments that came their way. Autobiographical narratives have been sites of historical scrutiny, but as the selections in this book exemplify, individuals cannot strictly be taken as mere products of certain social or political milieu alone as individuals respond differently to same influences. Moulded by complex, multiple processes and principles, and growing up within a pre-defined structure, they may go through similar patterns of experiences, but they look at them from completely different standpoints. That explains why, at the end of the day, these become celebration of individuality in the face of erasure and domination.

At the beginning of her autobiography, Sitadevi Khadanga asks her readers—“Is writing one’s life-story an expression of one’s will power and courage in words?”<sup>74</sup> It is not easy to say whether writing one’s autobiography is an act of courage, but the selections here certainly underscore how writing these have been acts of self-assertion on the part of these unforgettable women, who seem to have discovered an inner significance to their lives. And their narratives embody their desire for something beyond, something life-invigorating.

<sup>1</sup> Phakirmohana's autobiography was serialised in *Utkal Sabitya* during 1917-1918.

<sup>2</sup> Shoila Bala Das (1875-1968) published her memoir *A Look Before and After* written in English in 1956. This is the first autobiography written by a woman in Odisha. She has left a lively account of her life as a pioneer in the field of women's education in Odisha and her struggle to liberate women from ignorance and insidious forms of servitude.

<sup>3</sup> *Into the Sun* is a book by Frieda Hauswirth Das on women's lives in Odisha. First published by J.M. Dent & Sons, Limited, 1933 and reprinted by Prafulla, Odisha in 2006. Frieda was a Swiss painter and writer married to the Odia nationalist leader, Sarangadhar Das. She has also written a memoir, *A Marriage to India*, on her lived experience in Odisha and India.

<sup>4</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Picador, London, 2002, p.165.

<sup>5</sup> Das, Chittaranjan, *Odia sabityara itibasa: samajika samskrutika bhittibhumi*, Bhubaneswar: Pathika Prakasani, 2003, p. 159.

<sup>6</sup> Jayashree Nanda & Sangitarani Tripathy, "Development of Women Education in Odisha: Retrospect and Prospects. *Odisha Review*, September-October, 2016, pp. 85-90.

<sup>7</sup> Such acts were officially encouraged. On 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1866, *Utkal Dipika* reported that while attending an annual function at a school in Balasore, the local Magistrate sahib awarded three boys – offering each four rupees—who taught their sisters at home.

<sup>8</sup> Pyarimohan Acharya wrote *Odishara itibasa* (History of Odisha) in 1879. Biswanath Kar: Cuttack, 1879. It was the first book written on Odishan history by an Odia.

<sup>9</sup> Samantaray, Natabara, *Odia sabityara itibasa* (1803-1920), Bhubaneswar: Natabara Samantaray, 1983 (second edition).

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed discussion of Paika rebellion in Odisha read, *Paika Bidroha* by Surya Narayana Das, 1964 published by United Book House, Cuttack.

<sup>11</sup> Jayashree Nanda & Sangitarani Tripathy, "Development of Women Education in Odisha: Retrospect and Prospects. *Odisha Review*, September-October, 2016, pp. 85-90.

<sup>12</sup> Cuttack Baptist Church. *A Brief Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the Orissa Mission*, Cuttack: Orissa Mission Press, 1858, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> Phakirmohana Senapati. *Atmajeevancharita* in *Phakirmohana Granthabali*, Cuttack Students' Store, 1963 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)

<sup>14</sup> Haranath Bhattacharya, a follower of Keshab Chandra Sen, founded Utkal Brahma Samaj in 1869.

<sup>15</sup> In all possibility, this was a rebellious act than a spiritual one on the part of Madhusudan Das. Since he married a Christian girl after embracing Christianity, *Utkal Dipika* published the news of his conversion on 11 August 1866 and reported that he might have been converted to Christianity in order to marry a Christian girl.



- <sup>16</sup> Bansidhar Mohanty, *1866 Utkal Dipika*, Friends Publisher, Cuttack, 1978.
- <sup>17</sup> Odia Puranic literature, which has a great influence over people, is full with description of such practices.
- <sup>18</sup> J.A. Hopkins was an Inspector of Schools in Odisha.
- <sup>19</sup> *The Mayurbhanj* (1880) 1288 sal, 1 pousa, Monday.
- <sup>20</sup> *Balika patha* was written and published by Kanaka Manjari Devi, the queen of Khallikote in 1897
- <sup>21</sup> *Nari siksha* was written and published by Dinabandhu Garnayak in 1913
- <sup>22</sup> Reba Ray (1876-1936) was writer and social reformer of Odisha.
- <sup>23</sup> Jayashree Nanda & Sangitarani Tripathy, "Development of Women Education in Odisha: Retrospect and Prospects. Odisha Review, September-October, 2016, p. 87.
- <sup>24</sup> Erun, a Telugu weaver in Berhampore, was baptized in December 1827. At that time, he was seventy years old. He was the first ever convert of the Baptist Mission in Odisha.
- <sup>25</sup> "Report on the Progress of Education in Bihar and Orissa, 1924-1925," Patna: Government Press, P. 32.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ravenshaw College Shatabarshiki Bisesanka*, Ravenshaw College: Cuttack, 1970, P. 242.
- <sup>27</sup> Phakirmohana Senapati, "Patent medicine", *Galpa Swalpa*, Cuttack Students Store: Cuttack, 1961 (6<sup>th</sup> edition), p.17
- <sup>28</sup> Reba Ray's "Sannyasi" was published in *Utkal Dipika* in 1899; it is the first short story in Odia by a woman writer.
- <sup>29</sup> Kar, Supriya. *The Dying Moon* (English Translation of *Malajabna* by Upendra Kishore Das), Odisha Sahitya Akademi, 2017.
- <sup>30</sup> Ranjita Kumari Nayak, *Kuntala Katha Pratibha*, Odisha Book Store: Cuttack, 1986, p44
- <sup>31</sup> Op. cit, p.52.
- <sup>32</sup> Gouranga C Das & S. Das. *Kuntala Kumari Granthabali*. Naba Diganta: Cuttack, 2008, p.583-596.
- <sup>33</sup> In *A Lost Tradition: Early Women's Writing from Orissa*, Sachidananda Mohanty anthologises the impressive body of writing left by early women writers, who experimented with different genres of literature such as poetry, drama, treatises and prose fiction.
- <sup>34</sup> "Paricharika" was published between 1917 and 1920 and edited by Basanta Kumari Devi. She was Ramadevi Choudhury's mother.
- <sup>35</sup> It is commonly held that Madhavi Dasi was born during the second quarter of fifteenth century.

<sup>36</sup> Brundavati Dasi wrote *Purnatama Chandrodaya* in sixteenth century. Later, it was edited by Kailash Chandra Mohapatra and published by Shree Radhanath Cooperative Press, Cuttack, 1927.

<sup>37</sup> Nisanka Raynka Rani wrote *Padmavati Abhilasa* in eighteenth century. It is commonly held that she was born in 1779 and was married to Goura Chandra Nisanka Ray, the king of Budharasingi in 1788.

<sup>38</sup> Narendra Nari has written a narrative poem titled “Sashisena”. Her biographical details are unavailable.

<sup>39</sup> Rani Mohan Kumari was the queen of Sambalpur from 1827-1833. She wrote a poem titled, “Upakartika Mahatmya”; the pothi carrying the poem is available at the Odisha State Archives.

<sup>40</sup> Though biographical details are unavailable on her, she wrote devotional poems on Sri Jagannath.

<sup>41</sup> A discussion on Odia women poets during seventeenth century can be found in the essay “Analachita nari kabi katipaya: saptadasha satabdi,” by Pramila Mishra included in “Odia Lekhika: Adya parva”, edited by Odisha Lekhika Samsad & published by Pashima Publication, 2000.

<sup>42</sup> She was the mother of Niranjana Patnaik, the prominent Congress leader from Ganjam district.

<sup>43</sup> A detailed description of this episode can be found in the excerpt from Ramadevi Choudhury’s autobiography, *Jeevan pathe* in this book.

<sup>44</sup> Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India (The Cambridge History of India Series)*, Cambridge University Press: United Kingdom, 1996

<sup>45</sup> Odisha became a separate province on the basis of language in 1936.

<sup>46</sup> Ramadevi Choudhury, *Jeevan Pathe*, Grantha Mandir, Cuttack, 1984, p.

<sup>47</sup> Ramadevi Choudhury, *Jeevan Pathe*, Grantha Mandir, Cuttack, 1984, p.

<sup>48</sup> Annapurna Maharana, *Amruta anubhan*, Sikshasandhan, Bhubaneswar, 2003, p. 212.

<sup>49</sup> The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (Electronic Book), New Delhi, Publications Division Government of India, 1999.

<sup>50</sup> Godavari Devi, “Punya smrutiru khiye,” *Punyabati Godavari*, Biraj Mohan Das(ed.), Sudipta Prakashani, Bhubaneswar, 1997, p. 43.

<sup>51</sup> Ramadevi Choudhury, *Jeevan pathe*, Grantha Mandir, Cuttack, 1984, p. 40.

<sup>52</sup> Annapurna Das, “Mo piladina akhire Bhadrak,” *Siksha*. June, 2004. p.61.

<sup>53</sup> Nirupama Rath, *Alibha smriti, abbula anubhuti*, Cuttack: Sphutanik, 2004.

<sup>54</sup> Sumani Jhodia, *Muin Sumani kabuche*. Nilakantha Rath, Maharashtra, 2005, p. 57.

<sup>55</sup> Sitadevi Khadanga, *Mora jeevan smriti*. Lark Books, Cuttack, 1978, p.7.

<sup>56</sup> Sitadevi Khadanga, *Mora jeevan smriti*. Lark Books, Cuttack, 1978, p.86.

<sup>57</sup> Aparna Devi, “Narikabi Aparna Devi,” *Jhankar*, Issue 11, 1961 p. 1019.

- <sup>58</sup> Gita Hota. *Sabu smruti madhura*, Odisha Writer's Co-operative Society, Bhubaneswar, 2000, p. 144.
- <sup>59</sup> Bina Dei, *Akinchanara jeevan smruti*, Kahani, Cuttack, 2001, p. 48.
- <sup>60</sup> Bina Dei, *Akinchanara jeevan smruti*, Kahani, Cuttack, 2001, p. 80-81.
- <sup>61</sup> Simone De Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1953, p. 292.
- <sup>62</sup> Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Penguin Classics, London, 2001.
- <sup>63</sup> Rama Devi, *para Padartha*, Nijaswa Prakashana, Puri, 1998, p.65.
- <sup>64</sup> Sanghamitra Mishra, "Mo nani," *Sambad kalika*, 23 October 2009, p. 8.
- <sup>65</sup> Mandakini Das, *Smurti surabhi*, Banchhanidhi Smruti Pratisthan, Bhubaneswar, 2008, p. 23.
- <sup>66</sup> Snehilata Mohapatra, *Mo piladina*, Charikona, Bhubaneswar, 2008, p.14.
- <sup>67</sup> Sitadevi Khadanga, *Mora jeevan smruti*, op. cit., p.13.
- <sup>68</sup> Ramadevi Choudhury, *Jeevan pathe*, op. cit., 1984, p. 26.
- <sup>69</sup> Durgabati Tripathy, *Suneli smrutira surabhi*, Subarnashree Prakashani, Balasore, 2008, p. 133.
- <sup>70</sup> Annapurna Das, "Mo piladina akhire Bhadrak," op. cit., p. 74.
- <sup>71</sup> Sitadevi Khadanga, *Mora jeevan smruti*, op. cit., p. 83.
- <sup>72</sup> Writing any form of personal narrative, in Susan Bayly's words, "is an exercise in something that might best be referred to as critical memory, a process involving analytical reflection, rather than just the reception or inhabiting of things or events recalled and responded to." Susan Bayly, "Introduction", *Daughters of the Empire*, Iris Macfarlane, Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2006, P. Xxxvi.
- <sup>73</sup> Mandakini Das, *Smruti surabhi*, Banchhnidhi Smruti Pratisthan, Bhubaneswar, 2008, p. 21.
- <sup>74</sup> Sitadevi Khadanga, *Mora jeevan smruti*, op. cit. p. 8.





# The Memory Makers

Women Autobiographers of Odisha

## GANDHIANS

Ramadevi Choudhury

Sarala Devi

Godavari Devi

Annapurna Maharana

Annapurna Das

## Ramadevi Choudhury (1899-1985)

Ramadevi Choudhury was born on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1899 in Cuttack to Gopal Ballabh Das and Basanta Kumari Devi. Her father was a Deputy Collector and writer of *Bhima Bhuyan* (1928), the earliest Odia novel on the lives of tribals. Her mother edited *Paricharika*, the first woman's magazine in Odia. Ramadevi was the niece of Madhusudan Das, the preeminent Odia nationalist leader and thinker. Ramadevi's maternal grandfather, Nanda Kishore Das worked as a Superintendent of Garjat mahals under the British government; he was also a rich landlord.

Ramadevi is easily one of the best known women freedom fighters and social reformers of modern Odisha. She received no formal schooling but was taught at home. The lives of Swami Vivekananda, Annie Besant, and Madhusudan Das had a great impact on her mind in childhood. She was married at the age of fifteen to Gopabandhu Choudhury, who was the eldest son of Gokulananda Choudhury and hailed from a reputed landlord's family. Gopabandhu Choudhury had topped preliminary law examination at Calcutta University, but he discontinued his study and started working as a Deputy Collector at Cuttack in 1917. Ramadevi gave birth to a son in 1915 and a daughter in 1919.

Gopabandhu Choudhury resigned from government service in February 1921 and joined the freedom movement soon. Ramadevi not only supported her husband's decision, she also plunged into the freedom movement as a Congress member. She was only twenty-one, used to a life of comfort and luxury but she along with

her husband embraced the life of commoners and started living at Alaka ashram in Jagatsinghpur in 1928. As a freedom fighter, she was engaged in various kinds of reform work in villages, chief among them was to train girls and women volunteers who joined the Congress. After independence, inspired by Vinoba Bhave, she took part in the Sarvodaya movement and carried on social work till the end of her life. She was a recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj award in 1981 for her outstanding contribution to the uplift of women and children. She breathed her last on 22 July 1985.

Her autobiography, *Jeevan pathe* (Journey of Life) was published in 1984; however, a number of chapters included in it were published randomly in the monthly journal, *Sucharita* during 1975 - 1984. *Jeevan pathe* is a fascinating chronicle of Ramadevi's life and times, which illuminates aspects of her many-sided personality. She wrote the autobiography in the hope that her life story may help women overcome their fear and diffidence. Her autobiography provides an account of the key events of the freedom struggle in Odisha, her stepping out of home, and her work among the Harijans. One may read it with nostalgia for the old days and curiosity about conditions prevailing then: her family life, how she coped with her imperious mother-in-law, her efforts to promote women's literacy, and how Ramadevi worked, tactful and reserved, and got things done, mostly despite opposition. A life lived on the cutting edge of great public events has been narrated here with detachment.

In the following excerpt, she describes a few turning points of her life. The incidents which etch themselves in her memory have something to do with the glaring disparity between affluence and poverty. The degradation poverty brings about in human beings affected her deeply even when she was a young bride. It brings out her broad and sympathetic outlook, which is also reflected in the passage on the plights of mistresses. Keeping a mistress or concubine was not very common but seen in families who belonged to a high social class because of landed property and caste. What is interesting is how this practice was accommodated into the family structure.

## Marriage

I got married on 11 November, 1914. My father and my father-in-law had been friends since their school days. My father-in-law worked as a junior at my father's elder brother's chamber. Our families were very close and we used to visit each other frequently. My father's first wife and my mother-in-law were close friends; they fondly called each other "Chanda". My grandma always looked upon my mother-in-law as a daughter and used to send her gifts on festive occasions such as Raja and Kumara purnima. My mother-in-law used to invite my mother and my aunt (mother's sister) to her house whenever they walked past her house on their way back from school. She would comb their hair and serve them snacks. I heard both of them saying that they had never eaten anything as tasty as the fine rice they ate on Mondays at her place.

Those days, only a few aristocratic families lived in Cuttack. One of these was the family of Sudama Nayak, who served in the princely states. One found costly ornaments, silk saris and other decorative pieces in his house that he had received as gifts from kings. One rarely came across a person as affectionate as Sudama babu. He regarded my mother-in-law as his god-daughter. I had heard from my mother-in-law and others about Sudama babu's wife being deeply affectionate by nature, too. No one, who had come in contact with her even once, could ever forget her. Thus, the few aristocratic families in Cuttack used to live like a close-knit group, though not related to each other through ties of kinship.

On my father's birthday, Durga apa (my father's sister) and I used to present new clothes to him. We also prepared rice pancakes on this occasion. Tima apa had got married by then. Durga apa had died; I was the only one left to make arrangements for father's birthday celebration that year. Everyone in our family helped me in preparing food, but they thought that the main responsibility rested on me. I did all that was necessary. I offered him a new dhoti and a stole; I readied everything in the prayer room before offering food to our household deity as was customary on festive occasions. I



put a mark of sandalwood paste on my father's forehead, and then both of us sat down to eat. We were half way through our meal when we heard someone shouting—"Gopal, Gopal" at our front door. Father replied in a loud voice, "Please be seated. I'm having my meal. I'll join you in no time." He told my mother that it was Gokulananda Choudhury. As soon as father went into the sitting room, one could hear the voice of Gokulananda babu—"You've been looking for a match for your daughter; you didn't even bother to talk to me about it?" I had no further idea of the discussion that followed. I came to know a few days later that I was going to marry Gokulananda babu's son.

Everybody was very happy at the match. I was told that my eldest uncle, Madhusudan Das (father's elder brother) was the happiest of all. However, one thing seemed to bother everyone—how would I adapt myself to the Choudhury household? Some of my mother's friends like Chandrabhaga aunt and Shrimukha aunt advised her to break this alliance. Mother would tell them placidly, "If my daughter has any worth at all, she'll certainly be able to manage things properly." One day, Dhai came on a surprise visit to our house. Dhai was the concubine of my grandfather-in-law. Her manners were very refined. Along with my mother and grandmother, I had visited the Choudhury family a number of times since I was a child. Hence, there was no question of their wanting to see me.

The wedding day drew near. We went to our village home a few days before the wedding. Another uncle of mine (mother's second brother) fell ill at the time and this prevented his wife from attending my wedding. The wedding took place on the day of the eighth moon of the month of Margashira. In the two days before the wedding, my parents avoided looking me in the eyes nor could I look into theirs. If ever our eyes met, we could not hold back our tears.

That morning mother could restrain herself with great difficulty and gave me some words of advice, all the while gently

stroking my back—"Today your childhood comes to an end," she said, "Those who were strangers to you till today would become your own kith and kin. How far you would be able to bring them closer to you depends solely on you. You'll never experience any sorrow if you remember and do a few things. Have respect and affection for all in your husband's family without ever trying to find out if anyone loved you more than another. You'll have brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law and nephews and nieces. Take care of them as lovingly as you can. You should see to the comfort of everyone in the household. You'll hear many harsh words. You should keep calm and make sure that no harsh words ever escape your lips. You must not mind the way one may speak to you or behave with you. Your mother-in-law is a very strict person. We'll feel happy when we hear her praising you."

I mulled over these words all day long. Mother and my eldest aunt (mother's eldest brother's wife) felt worried because of my second uncle's illness. He used to say, "Gokulananda is very lucky to get such a daughter-in-law." My eldest uncle had told me that since he lived in Cuttack, he would keep in touch with me—"I mustn't hear your being spoken ill of. Your mother-in-law is a hot-tempered woman. You would lead a peaceful life if you won her heart. You would learn how to get on with all kinds of people." Everyone in our family felt apprehensive at the thought of my having to live with an ill-tempered mother-in-law. My mother's friends used to express their anxious concern to her. I heard all this, but kept quiet. After a while, I stopped thinking about the matter.

The wedding was celebrated with great pomp. Later, I heard those who had accompanied the bridegroom saying that they had never had such a grand feast in their lives before. My mother was particularly happy that the priests, the musicians, the palanquin bearers and the menials had eaten to their heart's content.

I found it difficult to imagine my life away from my mother. On the day of mangalapaga, the day before the wedding, my grandmother and I went in a palanquin to the Chateshwar temple

and had a darshan of Mahadev and Parvati. The ten or twelve days preceding this were spent in attending parties given by friends and relatives to me, the prospective bride. Durga apa was there at the time of my elder sister's wedding. She had died in the mean time and her absence made me sad. I set off for Kheras, the ancestral home of my husband riding a palanquin, early one morning and arrived at night. One or two incidents filled my heart with anxiety. These had also been painful in a way.

A number of old housemaids of my husband's family had come with the groom's party. One of them told my elders that once the wedding was over, the bride belonged to the husband's family and would have to follow its customs. She would have to wear her sari with a *keachha* (a manner that was considered old-fashioned) and tie her hair in a bun (an outdated style, which no one followed in our family). Womenfolk in our family burst into tears. All of them—my grandmother, mother and aunts became greatly worried, but as I now belonged to the other family, the old lady's demand was accepted.

"You'll have to do many such things against your wish," mother told me, "but you'll have to put up with these. You must not be angry on account of this. Don't ever say that you don't know how to do a thing or can't do something when you are asked to do it. Never complain about the food you may be given to eat. Eat cheerfully whatever is placed before you. You should wear whatever clothes or ornaments you are given to wear. Don't let them feel that you are wearing these against your wish. Try to do whatever work you are given to do even if you had never done it before."

I accepted the advice of my mother as binding on me as the teachings of the *Vedas*. But when, at the time of my departure, my hair was done in a bun, I could not restrain myself and burst into tears. No one in my family knew how to do a bun. Someone from the village must have done it. I remembered what Radhamani aunt had said to my mother. "You've brought up Belu in a liberal way. Will she be able to bear with Choudhurani (my mother-in-law)?"

She told my mother, “When I first came to Cuttack, I had to live with her. It was very difficult to cope with her.” I don’t remember the reply mother had given her.

The day after the wedding, Pitabasa uncle and Jagabandhu uncle came to see me and sat near me for some time, saying that their wives had asked them to spend some time with me. They too expressed to my grandma their anxiety of my getting on in the Choudhury household.

While my family members and relatives were worrying about how I would adjust myself in the Choudhury family, those in my in-laws family wondered how a “Christian” girl like me would fit into their house. When my father-in-law had disclosed to his wife his decision to take me as a daughter-in-law, she had objected on two counts. One was that, since my mother did not have any son, I might have inherited this gene and might not bear a son. Secondly, I had lived with Madhu barrister (my eldest uncle), who had embraced Christianity. I wore stockings and shoes even at home. Hence, would it be possible for a girl like me to fit into an orthodox household like hers? Besides, friends and relatives would be critical of the first daughter-in-law chosen from a “Christian” family! My father-in-law was able to persuade her after a great deal of arguments and made her give her consent to the marriage. Still the apprehensions persisted among the family members. Almost everyone was anxiously waiting to see how a girl from a “Christian” family would conduct herself in her husband’s house, whether she would obey her mother-in-law and so on and so forth.

I could not set out for my husband’s village the day after the wedding because it was a Thursday. I was sent there on Friday morning. The palanquin-bearers walked very fast. My father walked beside the palanquin for a little distance and, then, stroking my hair, stayed back. Groups of people stood all along the road up to Bahukud, about three miles from our village, waiting to see me going to my in-laws’ house. I sat for the whole day inside the palanquin; I did not even drink a glass of water on the way. I was completely

worn out. At noon, we stopped at Ayatpur to rest ourselves and to have some food. A housemaid of our family, Budhi, accompanied me. She walked fast and kept pace with the palanquin-bearers. She entreated me to take some food and drink a little water, but I refused. It was already night when the palanquin was finally placed in front of my husband's ancestral house in Kheras. I did not know what time it was, but it must have been very late in the night. A large number of people had gathered and the place was full of noise and bustle. I could sense immediately that I was being watched intently by the elderly womenfolk of the family. As soon as the palanquin was laid on the ground, Dethi (my husband's aunt), the eldest of women in family, cried out, "I'll see the bride's face first." She gave a good look at me and declared, "Maguna's mother has chosen a beautiful daughter-in-law; I only wish she obeyed her!"

The next day, I came to know that a large number of women relatives had gathered there. They included my elder sisters-in-law (sisters and cousins of my husband), aunts-in-law (sisters and cousins of my father-in-law, enjoying a status similar to that of my mother-in-law) and their daughters. All of them were apprehensive—how would this girl from a "Christian" family behave herself? Would she accept our customs or would she want to live as she did at her parental home? I overheard them discuss this among themselves. There was no question of my speaking to anyone. I sat quietly wondering if I could ever make these people happy. A box full of cosmetics, trinkets, tit bits had been sent with me. My mother-in-law asked everybody to come and have a look when she opened the box and gave to each whatever she liked.

A new bride had to prepare sandalwood paste with which to make designs on small dishes meant to be presented to the elders of the family. The daughters of the house had to take these to the elders of the family when they finished their bath. Maga apa, the eldest sister of my husband, took one elderly woman of the family into her confidence and told her, "She has been brought up in an urbane environment. How could you expect her to know all this? Each one of us should prepare one set." So the elder girls

such as Rama and Chanchala made the paste and decorated the dishes and took them to give to the elders. My eldest aunt-in-law (wife of father-in-law's younger brother) stopped them on the way and scrutinised the designs. After giving a hard look at the designs supposedly made by me, she brought me some sandalwood paste and a thin stick and asked me to draw a line with it. As soon as I had done so, she said, "I now know who has done those designs!"

"Aunt," said Maga apa, "how would she know how to do this? All of us should help her adjust herself to the new environment. Should you go about saying such things?" Though I failed in making designs with sandalwood paste, I received praise for making paan to her taste; connoisseurs of paan also lavished their praise on me. Nishamani apa was never impressed with the way anyone else prepared paan for her, but she liked those made by me.

Every movement of mine—how I sat, how I got up, how I walked and the way I ate—was being carefully watched. I conducted myself very cautiously so that I would never be accused of lacking refinement and a sense of decorum. I remembered what mother had told me on the morning of my wedding, "You should eat cheerfully whatever is given to you at your mother-in-law's house."

In this way, fifteen days passed. I had no one to talk to; I spent most of my time sitting quietly. I realised that acting on my mother's advice was not that simple. I would have to give up my personal comforts and wishes if I were to make all these people happy. The fortnight seemed to have added several years to my age. All my childlike thoughts disappeared. The only thought that bothered me was what I should do to please every one of them. I could not even know when my likes and dislikes about food, clothes etcetera ceased to matter.

I found that a makeshift latrine, with a couple of bricks to sit on enclosed by palm leaf mats had been set up for me. "Dei," said Budhi, "you should answer the call of nature once in the morning. You wouldn't be able to go out at any other time of the day as there would be too many people around." Later, I learnt from Dhai that

young brides were not supposed to leave their rooms. Dhai had accompanied many daughters of my husband's family to their in-laws' family. She would collect their urine in a wooden pot meant to keep turmeric paste and dispose of the urine quietly avoiding others' eyes. She did not have any other container for this purpose. We came to Cuttack on the sixteenth day, which was celebrated as the auspicious *sholamangala* day. All of us travelled in palanquins. The palanquin that had carried me to my in-laws' was quite spacious. My niece, Bula sat in it by my side. She must have been seven or eight years old. She would open the palanquin door a crack, peep out and ask endless questions. But I had lost all appetite for small talk. A single thought bothered me—Now that I am finally on my way to Cuttack to live with my in-laws, I would have to conduct myself in such a way that no one would ever have any occasion to find fault with me.

### **Plight of Concubines**

I knew nothing at all about the plight of concubines as long as I was with my parents. No one in my parents' family or in my maternal uncles' family ever had a mistress as far as I knew. When I came to my father-in-law's place, I came to know that Sadhabi Dhai, who was a member of the household, was the concubine of my grandfather-in-law. She was only seven when somebody had brought her to this household. My father-in-law's mother, Kokila Devi, brought her up. Marrying her off was a problem when she came of age as no one was prepared to marry a girl of unknown caste and parentage. My grand father-in-law, Brajasundar Mangaraj decided to keep her as his concubine. In those days, married women looked upon it as an advantage if their husbands chose to have a concubine. The wife would lord it over her. The other woman would do all the menial work and take care of the children while the wife would live an easy life.

Dhai used to tell us that Brajasundar babu was afraid of his wife's displeasure and would meet her at all sorts of odd places like the cowshed or the shed where paddy was husked. In due course,

she bore him a son. This child was named Vidura. He died when he was only twenty-two. After the death of my grandfather-in-law, it became the responsibility of Dhai to accompany newly-married daughters of the family to their in-laws' houses and help them adjust themselves in their new families. Dhai was as intelligent as she was affectionate a person. She was always attentive to others' needs. She had accompanied my mother-in-law when she shifted to Cuttack.

In course of time, I met many more concubines. My mother-in-law's grandfather had a concubine named Budhi, and her father had two concubines, Mukuta and Malil. They were all very good-looking and well-mannered. Whenever any one of them visited us, it was my duty to cook the dishes she would like to have and prepare paan for her. Api, another mistress, used to come from my sister-in-law's place. She was quite ill-mannered.

Dhai had a sore in her mouth that did not heal in spite of availing herself the best treatment available in those days. She could not open her mouth wide nor could she eat hot food. She could take only soft food. I had to smuggle things for her sake. She loved ladoos. Most often we had ladoos in stock and I would give some to Dhai without my mother-in-law's knowledge. I would prepare some halwa for her or some vegetable curries of which she was fond. All these would be kept in pots hung from the ceiling in Dhai's room. Mother-in-law loved her, but she did not like any special attention given to her. She would once in a while criticise me indirectly for giving her special attention. This hurt Dhai and she would ask me not to do anything special for her. I did not pay any heed to her words. I had grown used to my mother-in-law's criticism in such matters and I went my way.

Nathia's mother lived in great misery. I used to give her some extra rice without anyone's knowledge. Mother-in-law loved Moti, but never cared to do anything about her needs. How could the poor woman get on without any help? Mother-in-law had no greed for wealth. She could have saved a lot of money if she had cared,



but she did not. She did not make any ornaments for herself nor did she have a collection of fine clothes. She used to wear silver ornaments because it was customary in her family not to wear gold ornaments and she held the belief that changing the custom might bring harm to her children.

Now the question of Benga's marriage came up. Her marriage was arranged with Jagannath Mohanty, who was a brother-in-law of my mother's cousin. My mother-in-law wanted that I should shoulder all the responsibilities of the wedding ceremony. She desired that everything should be done in the way she would like it, but she would not give a hint of what she wanted. I had to divine her thoughts and act accordingly. We could collect money owed by my father-in-law's clients. Maga apa and her husband, Debendra babu took charge of the event and saw everything through. They were methodical in everything they did. I learnt a lot from them, which stood me in good stead throughout my life.

The wedding was managed on a very low budget. It was decided that some of my ornaments, silk saris, the palanquin and other things that I had brought with me would be given to her as dowry. This did not cause me the slightest worry as I felt that all these things did not belong to me, but to the family. The family was free to dispose of these things in any way it liked.

Benga's wedding was over, but my mother-in-law would not stop rambling about it. She could not accept her fatherless-daughter being married to a man who had lost both his parents. No one in the three generations of her family had married someone hailing from Patamundai. Most of the men in the groom's family had been married more than once and she feared the same fate might befall her daughter. She complained that the girl had been gotten rid of because she did not have a father to care for her and so on. She continued grumbling till Jagannath babu rose to the rank of a district judge.

The daughter of my eldest uncle (mother's brother) was given in marriage to Jagannath Das of Kantapari in 1920. He

belonged to the family of a rich landlord and had an M.A. degree. On one occasion, my uncle said, “I got a son-in-law who was an M.A., but none of my sons possessed an M.A. degree.” This hurt his sons, but they could in no way fulfil their father’s expectations. The wedding took place at their home in their village, Kumra Jaipur. They had invited even their distant relatives; all had come to attend it. On that occasion, I met many old and dear friends and relatives and spent some time with them.

I saw the dire poverty that prevailed in villages in the region. One could never collect one’s clothes, which were spread out in the sun to dry. The villagers simply took them away, either stealing them or begging for them. At mealtimes, children in large numbers, who were brought in by their parents, were made to sit in rows. When my uncle saw this, he instructed his manager to get all the paddy stocked in the granary husked and use it for feeding the hungry in the village as long as the stock lasted. The plantain and lotus leaves in the village, which were used as leaf plates, were exhausted long before the stock of rice ran out. Uncle did not have to arrange leaf plates. People used all sorts of bamboo baskets covered with cloth to take food. They ate even from cement floors washed clean. None of us brought back the spare clothes that we had taken with us. This was the condition of people in villages in Odisha at the end of the First World War. Those of our poor relations who had come to attend the wedding simply stayed on even after the ceremony was over. They left only when the stock of rice was exhausted.

### **Meeting Gandhiji**

Three, four days after submitting his resignation, Gopa babu started visiting the Swarajya Ashram. By that time, everybody knew that Gandhiji would visit Cuttack, and so there was a fresh surge of excitement and enthusiasm among the workers and volunteers. People came in large numbers to the Ashram to join the movement. Atal da, Dr Atal bihari Acharya, took charge of them. He was a soft-spoken man, but a revolutionary at heart. He had been associated with extremist movement when he was studying medicine in

Calcutta. An image of goddess Kali hung on a wall of his room in the hostel. Everyone thought that Atal da was a devotee of goddess Kali. One day the police came to search his room. They searched all over the room but did not touch the image of goddess Kali out of reverence—Atal da had hidden his revolver behind it.

Later, Atal da joined the non-cooperation movement and got deeply involved in it. There was a time when no one dared to attend public meetings or join demonstrations organised by the Congress. On such occasions, Atal da alone would be tramping the streets with a tri-colour flag on his shoulder. He would go to the sands of the river Kathjodi, plant the flag there and give his speech even if there was none to listen to.

Gandhiji arrived in Cuttack on the day of Dola purnima. Everyone was bursting with enthusiasm on that day. So many things had to be taken care of and all were busy without taking a break. A women's meeting was scheduled at Binod Bihari on that day at two in the afternoon and a public meeting, in the evening on the riverbed. My mother-in-law was sure that I would attend these meetings. She asked me to finish the household work early and offered to look after the kids while I attended the meetings.

I went to Binod Bihari at noon. The hall, which was used for worshipping the image of goddess Durga during the festival, had been dusted and scrubbed clean. Carpets had been spread on the floor for the audience to sit on. I came up with the idea of beginning the meeting with an opening song. At that moment, Hiranyamayi Devi, wife of Professor Mohinimohan Senapati, arrived there. We were great friends. She agreed to sing as soon as I broached the idea to her. She needed a harmonium for this purpose. Haimavati Devi, who lived in the same compound, immediately managed to get one. As the time of Gandhiji's arrival drew near, the audience became quiet. There were some forty women present in the room. Soon we could hear sounds of slogans from outside, and then Gandhiji, accompanied by Kasturba and Devdas Gandhi, entered the hall. Some other people followed them.

Gandhiji made a very short speech in which he exhorted women to give up wearing ornaments and donate these for the cause of the freedom movement. Some made cash donations. I had taken with me a bundle of yarn spun on an unsteady spinning wheel at home. My mother-in-law had warned me against offering any ornaments to Gandhiji even if he asked for them. As usual I heeded her advice and did not donate any of my ornaments. When I offered Gandhiji the bundle of yarn, he gave me a look—a strange, deep look, which still haunts me.

Thus I had a glimpse of Gandhiji. My mother-in-law was eager to see him, but she would not express her wish. In the evening, she accompanied me to the embankment instead of deputing Bami didi. There was no public address system, so we could hardly hear what Gandhiji said. However, our desire to have a glimpse of Gandhiji and Kasturba was fulfilled.

It was decided that the week between 6<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> April would be observed as National Week in memories of the nationwide protest on April 6, 1919 against the draconian Rowlatt act and the massacre of unarmed people that took place at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar on April 13, 1919. Fasting would be observed on the first and the last days with only one light meal in the evening. There would be a strike with all shops and offices closed for the day. No one had ever heard of such novel ideas before. The volunteers went round the town and persuaded shopkeepers to close down their shutters. The strike became a huge success.

Gopa babu and I observed fast. My mother-in-law was perplexed as we kept a fast and yet did not follow the tradition of having particular kind of food taken on such a day. We took our usual food in the evening. We did not have to go through any ritual. It pleased me much though it perplexed my mother-in-law that one just sat down to eat when the fast ended without having to go through the ritual offering of food to the deity. Others did not have to be on tenterhooks all the time to ensure that we did not touch cooked parboiled rice, for instance, which would inadvertently

pollute our food. I felt an inner peace at the thought that our fast did not cause any anxiety to anybody. I spent quite a lot of time that day spinning. The wheel and the spindles were no good. I was also quite unskilled. Hence, the output was small.

### **The Salt Satyagraha**

It was January 1930. The Indian National Congress had adopted a resolution on *purna swaraj*, total independence at its Lahore session; steps were taken to pledge people to this on as large a scale as possible. For this purpose, public meetings were scheduled on 26<sup>th</sup> January in as many places as possible.

It was decided that the resolution would be read out to the audience phrase by phrase and they were to repeat the same in unison. A ceremonial hoisting of the national flag would be carried out in the morning and the public meeting would be held at five in the evening—that was the programme fixed for the day in Cuttack.

The authorities had, in the meantime, banned all meetings and demonstrations at public places by circulating an order under section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code. Gandhiji had strictly instructed that there should not be any civil disobedience till he gave an order. Therefore, the flag hoisting ceremony was held at a private place. It had been announced that the public meeting would be held at the Town Hall and permission for the same had been sought, but it was not granted. It was decided that the meeting would be held inside the compound of our house. The news that the Government did not allow the public meeting to be held at the Town Hall spread like wild fire all over Cuttack and it infused more interest and enthusiasm among people. The attendance at the meeting was beyond our expectation. Since there was not enough space in our compound, people got on to the roof top, sat on the compound wall and on the embankment of the river nearby our house. There were no loudspeakers in those days, yet the vast gathering took the pledge in an orderly manner. The acceptance of the resolution as a pledge by large masses of the people electrified the atmosphere. After this, we went to Alaka ashram.

At that time, the only newspaper published from Cuttack was the weekly *Samaj*. Hence, we could not get ready information on the day-to-day developments taking place in Cuttack and elsewhere. Our principal task was to enroll as many people as possible from the surrounding villages as members of the Congress. Pundit Pranakrushna Padhiari monitored this work. The members had to pay an annual fee of four anas. Frequent circulars came from the All India Congress Committee containing information about the latest developments and instructions for the volunteers. This helped us in encouraging people. Inchudi, a place on the coast in Balasore, around one hundred and twenty five miles from Cuttack was selected as the venue for breaking the Salt Act in Odisha. The satyagrahis were supposed to march all the way from Cuttack to Balasore. The halting places on the route were chosen; detailed plans of public meetings and demonstrations were drawn for each place. Public meetings and demonstrations took place almost every day in Cuttack.

The 6<sup>th</sup> April, the day fixed for the start of the march by the first batch of satyagrahis, drew near. My husband, our children and I came to Cuttack on the 4<sup>th</sup> April. The excitement and thrill were growing day by day. The first batch of satyagrahis started out from Cuttack early in the morning of the scheduled day. They carried spare clothes, reed mattresses and other things in rolls, which slung from their shoulders.

There were twenty satyagrahis in the first batch, which was led by Gopabandhu Choudhury. Acharya Harihar Das was his second-in-command. Among others, Gourang Charan Das, Raghunath Das, Sudarshan Praharaj and Vinod Choudhuri from Cuttack; Bishwanath Hota and Golak De from Balasore; Raghunath Mishra from Puri and Dayananda Satpathy from Sambalpur were in this group. Gopa babu was arrested on the way as he had addressed a meeting in Cuttack. The rest of the satyagrahis continued their march, but after a few days, they took a train to Balasore to be able to demonstrate civil disobedience on 13<sup>th</sup> April. And they accomplished it.

“What should I do now,” was the question that plagued my mind after the satyagrahis had left. I remembered what Gandhiji had said in his speech at Binod Bihari, Cuttack in 1921. I made up my mind to go out and join the movement with the conviction that a course of action would emerge. Civil disobedience by breaking the Salt Act was demonstrated at Inchudi under the leadership of Acharya Harihar Das. The police tried to suppress it through arresting the demonstrators, lathi charging, taking away the manufactured salt from them and breaking their utensils.

A group of women including Kiranbala Sen, Malati Devi and I went to Inchudi from Cuttack to witness the event. We reached Balasore in the evening, stayed at the Satyagraha camp located in an old building that had earlier housed an office of East India Company. It was locally known as the Permit Kothi. We went to Inchudi the next morning in a motor car. The car could not go up to the place of demonstration and we had to walk some distance.

It was summer and around eleven o’ clock in the morning. Some of us were thirsty. In those days, there were practically no wells in most parts of Balasore district and tube-wells were still not introduced. People used the water from ponds and tanks for drinking. We went to a tank to have a drink. The water near the bank was muddy; we thought that we would get clean water if we went a little inside the tank. As we waded in, our footsteps stirred the sludge at the bottom and the water became as muddy as it was near the bank. We had to drink the muddy water to quench our thirst. I realised for the first time the kind of water scarcity vast number of villagers in our country had to put up with.

At midday, we took rest at Inchudi camp. We went to Shrijang, a nearby village, in the afternoon. We went from door to door in that village and told the women that we were going to break the salt law. We appealed to them to join us. The women of the village responded positively and around fifteen hundred women went with us to collect lumps of salt mud from the sea front; salt was to be extracted from the lumps of salt mud by a simple process. All

of us gathered some lumps of mud, but the police were nowhere to be seen. We were told that the police have been instructed not to take any action against women under any circumstance. Such discrimination irked us. We spoke to the women of Shrijang about the larger aspects of the movement and returned to Balasore in the evening.

I went to stay at Alaka Ashram. At that time, Bhagirathi Mohapatra was staying in his village, Chatra. The idea of breaking the salt law had gripped my mind. I learnt that discussions were going on regarding the choice of a suitable area for breaking the salt law in Cuttack district and that Kujang had been chosen for the purpose. After consulting Bhagu babu and Narayan Birabara Samanta, I proceeded to Kujang. I took Prafulla Kumari, wife of Bishwanath Hota, with me. Malati Devi had already reached Kujang along with Dr Brajanath Mishra. Some members of the banara sena, the army of teenagers who had joined the movement, were already there. We observed civil disobedience during the day. In the evening, we would sit down to make plans for the next day. One day, it was decided that we, the organisers, should demonstrate civil disobedience after announcing the time and places in advance. Malati Devi, Braja babu and Samanta chose sites for themselves. It was decided that I would lead the demonstration at a place called Kaliapata.

I came to learn from Samanta that the queen of Paradip favoured the civil disobedience movement. We were staying at a monastery, known as Beri math, near Chatua. I went to meet the queen along with an elderly satyagrahi. The queen welcomed us warmly. She was the maternal grandmother of Ratnamali Jena, Samanta's wife. The queen readily agreed to join the satyagraha at Kaliapat. She also suggested holding meetings of women in villages and mobilising them to go to Kaliapat with us.

In the meantime, Madhavananda Mishra, the magistrate entrusted with the task of preventing civil disobedience in Kujang, ordered the ferrymen not to ferry us in their boats. Rivers



crisscrossed the area and it was impossible to travel without ferrying on boats. The news of the magistrate's order spread like wild fire. We had planned to take a boat from Paradip at night and reach Kaliapat early in the morning. The queen would not be able to walk all the way to that place. Some of her servicemen knew how to row a boat. It was only necessary to procure a boat. Her men could get a small boat by nightfall. At about eleven at night, some men went to check and found that the magistrate and his entourage were fast asleep. We started on our journey. We carried only a kerosene lantern with us whose wick was turned very low so that no light would be visible from the bank. As far as I remember, it was the eighth day after the new moon. The moon rose shortly after we had started; the boat glided silently in the moonlight.

Next morning, people of Kaliapat were amazed to see the queen in person in their village. The queen appealed to women to join us and break the salt law. She explained in brief the objectives of the movement to the assembled villagers. Of course, people had already formed an idea about it because they had been witnessing the daily demonstrations of civil disobedience and the tyranny of the police. They had seen people who took up just a handful of the salt mud and beaten black and blue. At the queen's appeal, women came out with baskets. Kaliapat was a large village and so the congregation consisting of one or two women from each household was a big one. Some children also tagged along. The queen led us to Gandakipur. A troupe of policemen was present there. All of us including the children collected the salt mud. The police stood there like spectators. People did not like the passivity of the police as they had expected to watch some drama. The salt satyagraha was brought to an end when the rainy season set in.

In the meantime, Shrijang witnessed some disorder and the Government imposed a punitive tax there. One night a police van loaded with policemen and accompanied by a magistrate reached the village. People sent away women and children from the village out of panic. The police began collecting punitive tax forcibly and indulged in other excesses as well. When the news of this

incident reached Cuttack, it was decided to send a team of eminent people, who would gather firsthand information on the basis of which reports would be written and published in newspapers. Lakshminarayan Sahu went there as soon as he was entreated and sent a detailed account of the incident.

Malati Devi, Surendranath Patnaik and I went to Balasore, consulted Mukund Prasad Das and proceeded to Khantapada by a morning train. We walked towards Shrijang, which was eight miles from the railway station. It was rainy season; water stood on the fields. There was no proper road to the village. We had to walk on narrow hedges between plots of land. At some places, the hedges were also under water and no matter how carefully we walked, our feet slipped into the water. Surendra was carrying some food which fell into the water. Since we had no hope of getting anything else to eat that day, we waded into the waist deep water and picked up the stuff.

We came near a tank and sat down on its embankment to eat that water-soaked food. We were all dripping. Malati Devi remarked that some flattened rice would have satisfied our hunger. Where would we get flattened rice from? We spotted a gentleman coming towards us. We became slightly hopeful. He came and stood before us and asked, “What are you doing here in wet clothes? Where are you coming from? Where are you up to?” We could not recognise him. He said, “Can’t you recognise me? I’m Sridhar Panigrahi, brother of Karunakar.”

Malati Devi asked him if he could offer us some flattened rice. He invited us to his house in a reverential tone of voice as though we had honoured him by merely asking him for food. He served us flattened rice. Malati Devi asked for some salt and tamarind. Sridhar babu served us this simple meal with great affection and respect. He told us how to reach Shrijang and sent along a guide who accompanied us part of the way.

We were surprised to see the situation in Shrijang. A single man was not spotted in the village. There was no question of our

staying there for the night as we were all in wet clothes. We divided ourselves into groups and went from house to house. Malati Devi found five or six women huddled inside a house. She took me in to show me this as though it was a strange sight. I had never felt as deeply disturbed as I felt that day on seeing the ravaged village and the terror-struck women. I cannot even now bring myself to describe the scene.

The three of us came to the Bahanaga bazaar railway station after collecting all the information we needed to write a report. We had been on our feet all the time since we got down from the train at Khantapada at seven in the morning and reached Bahanaga bazaar at eight in the evening. The only time that we had sat down for some time was at Shridhar Panigrahi's place, where we had taken flattened rice—the only meal we had in the whole day. The train to Cuttack, which we would board, was due to arrive quite some time later. We were all dead tired.

We were wondering how to get something to eat when a Congress worker appeared on the scene. He knew the station master very well. He took me to the latter's quarter. He introduced us to him. The station master said that he would have been glad to have us as his guests and serve us food, but he dared not do so because of the police. Though he said this, he did not seem to have reconciled himself to this. He placed some uncooked rice and vegetables before me and said, "I'm going away for a while. Please cook and eat this by the time the train comes." I boiled the rice and made a thin curry with sour elephant apple. We had our fill and came to Cuttack by the night train.

The salt satyagraha had to be discontinued at the onset of the rainy season. We were assigned different tasks. I was instructed to go to Jajpur to organise public meetings, collect funds and enroll volunteers. I reached Jajpur Road railway station by train accompanied by a Congress member. We got into a bus, which was going to the town. The bus started, but then suddenly came to a halt after a short while. There was a commotion among the passengers.

A sub-inspector of police accompanied by a constable came to us and told me very politely that I would not be allowed to go to Jajpur by this bus. That was the order issued by the Sub-Divisional Officer of Jajpur. I noticed that this aroused sympathy for us among the passengers. A few of them started arguing loudly. However, I got down from the bus with my companion. Some people suggested that we go by a bullock cart, but I decided to walk the eighteen miles. It was rather late in the night when we reached Jajpur.

I had been instructed to meet Birupaksha Kar, a lawyer in Jajpur, who would make arrangements for my stay. I met Birupaksha babu. He found a place for me at another lawyer, Jagmohan Tiwari's place. A tour programme was drawn up in consultation with the local Congress workers. We visited a number of places according to our plan. I went to the villages around the town and held meetings, which was attended by men and women.

At that time, people were beginning to take interest in the principles of the Congress. They were also intrigued by the sight of a woman going about in the open addressing meetings and collecting funds. It was possible to organise meetings of women in villages with a little effort. They almost buried us under their questions. What did the Congress want them to do? What good would doing those things yield? How did you come out of your home? How do you maintain yourself while travelling? What would be the final outcome of the Congress movement? In what ways would the poor and illiterate people be benefited by it? What good would it do to women? How would this country be run when this Government went away? Would it mean that there would be no police and no courts? How would then it be possible to keep the wicked under control?

The attendance at the meetings used to be small, but it took quite some time to answer all their questions in detail. I was glad that I had the opportunity to answer all these questions. When Congress workers belonging to the same village would be present in the meeting, they would try to discourage them to ask

any question. “How much understanding do you have that you are asking so many questions?” They would say impatiently, “Just try to remember what she has told you and act accordingly. She’s a busy person and has many things to do. Why are you wasting her time?” I would take the side of the women and rebut, “If they don’t ask and find out what they want to know, why the meeting was organised at all? I’ll answer their questions, no matter how much time it may take.”

Sometimes I felt overwhelmed by the welcome the womenfolk gave me. At one place, they brought me a glass of milk when I asked for a drink of water. I had to explain patiently the effects of drinking milk when one’s body needed plain water. They showered on me affection, respect and care thousand times more than I deserved. However, few women came out to join the movement in 1930. A large number of women came in 1932 and were arrested and put in prisons.

A programme was drawn up for my visit to Bari. I went to Guhali, thirteen miles from Jaipur, in a bullock cart. I spent some time with Mrs. Reba Ray, who was staying in that village and started out for Bari. Though I had become accustomed to walking long distances I had little experience of travelling in small and shaky country boats. The rivers between Guhali and Bari were in spate and had drowned their banks and the whole area, almost up to Bari, a stretch about five miles was under water. The boat was quite small and there was a strong wind. The waves were as high as the sides of the boat. Though I tried not to show that I was afraid, the Congress workers accompanying me continually assured me that there was no cause for fear since the boatmen was very experienced. I sat in the boat holding on tightly to the sides of the boat and with my eyes tightly shut. I reached Bari safely.

When I went to the public meeting in the evening, I found that there was a large gathering. It was a regular mass meeting. Quite a large number of women were present and so there was no need to hold a separate meeting for them. When preparations

began for holding a session of the Indian National Congress at Puri in 1931 and volunteers were trained for the occasion, a large number of women and unmarried girls enrolled themselves as volunteers and were trained in camps meant for women. Many of them were imprisoned when the movement was resumed in 1932. The Congress workers in that area had chopped off innumerable date palm trees in an attempt to stop the manufacture of intoxicating liquor from their sap. This was part of the reform initiatives of the movement. From Bari, I went to other villages including Kalyanpur, Purusottampur and Ahiyas. A large number of women and girls from these villages also came forward to join the Congress volunteer training camps. After addressing meetings in several villages and collecting some funds, I came back to Jajpur and travelled to the railway station in a bullock cart since I was not allowed to travel by a bus.

After about a couple of decades when I was active in the Bhoodan movement initiated by Acharya Vinoba Bhave, one day I went to the gentleman who was the Sub-Divisional Officer of Jajpur in 1930 and requested him to make a gift of land. It seemed to me that he felt embarrassed because of the actions he had taken against me when he was in service.

“You rendered your duty as a government servant at that time.” I told him, “Now it’s your duty to share a part of your land with the landless. Please do this duty.”

He took it in good spirit and donated a piece of land.

**(Jeevan Pathe, pp. 21-26, pp. 37-40, pp. 84-92)**



## **Sarala Devi (1904 –1986)**

The first Odia woman to take part in the freedom movement and court imprisonment, Sarala Devi was born into an influential zamindar family in 1904 in Narilo village, Cuttack. In 1918, at the age of 14, she was married to Bhagirathi Mohapatra, a rich advocate in Cuttack. As a free spirited woman, she did not follow the traditional purdah system, which was prevalent during that time. The Jallianwala bagh massacre deeply disturbed the young Sarala Devi and she was the only woman to have participated in the rally held against the incident at Cuttack in 1919. In 1921, she decided to fight against the British and join the freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. During Gandhi's visit to Cuttack in 1921, Sarala Devi had visited door-to-door and persuaded women to attend his meeting. She had translated the Hindi lecture given by Gandhi into Odia and explained it to women on that occasion. She had founded the "Utkal Mahila Sammilani" and "Udjoga Mandir" for creating awareness among women in Odisha. In 1931, she had given the welcome address at the Karachi session of Congress and was hailed as a national leader.

Sarala Devi was elected to Odisha Legislative Assembly in 1937 after Odisha was declared a separated province. She initiated many bills beneficial for the peasants; she also drew the attention of the government to their problems through her speech during her tenure at the Legislative Assembly. She was the first woman to act as a temporary speaker in the Odisha Legislative Assembly. She also served as the secretary of Utkal Sahitya Samaj, the oldest

literary institution of Odisha. She was active in public life till her death on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1986.

Sarala Devi is best remembered for her essays and critical writings in which she highlighted the suffering of women and the need to break out of the stranglehold of an orthodox, oppressive society. She wrote relentlessly against the cruelty and discrimination against women. Notable among her books are *Bishwa Biplabini* (1930), *Utkalara Nari Samasya* (1934), and *Narira Dabi* (1934), *Bharatiya Mahila Prasanga* (1935), *Nari Jagata* (1935).

One wished Sarala Devi had written a full-length autobiography considering her lifelong engagement with the public sphere as a political leader and writer. Unfortunately, what she left behind were fragments of autobiographical pieces. The autobiographical fragment, “Mo jeevanara eka smaraniya ghatana,” (A Memorable Incident in My Life) was taken from her unpublished papers in 2010. It focuses on her experiences as a prisoner and her longings for her child.

### **A Memorable Incident of my Life**

Not only my life, but everyone’s life is full of incidents. Our memories remain enveloped within our birth and death and burn away in funeral pyre. Achievements, marriage, illness and convalescence, child-birth, death, life-threatening calamities, love of friends or their betrayal, ingratitude of one who you have obliged, respect for one’s talent and good deeds—all these leave pleasant or unpleasant impressions in our minds. Both men and women go through these experiences in life.

When human beings grow old they no longer get carried away by memories of incidents which had made them happy or sad when they were young. Memories which mesmerise us or drown us in sorrow remain in our minds, but they lack the vigour of the experiences of the present moment. These memories seem like statues of stone preserved in a museum. In other words, one cannot claim that the incidents that happen in a day have a permanent



place in one's mind. Experiences of life appear every moment and dissolve like the foam in the sea. The event of the morning loses its significance by the evening, the event of the night ceases to have any significance by the morning; they only leave a temporary mark. In day time, we draw pleasure from wakefulness, but sleep overpowers us, and our lively experiences of the morning lose themselves in sleep. Wherefrom would arise the luxury of seeing exciting dreams featuring memorable events? The shadow of death devours millions of events every moment. How many events remain fresh in one's basket of memories that I would choose one from it?

Which one would I select from many interesting memorable events of my life? Marriage and motherhood are the memorable events in every woman's life. This is a common truth. These happened in my life, too. Since the beginning of my political life, I contested elections and went on to become the first woman member of legislature. I took up charge as a temporary speaker in the assembly, became the director of a co-operative bank, which was something new in India. I defeated an eminent litterateur of Odisha in the election to the senate of the first university of the state. I also became a member of Cuttack Local Board. I was elected the vice-president of Utkal Sahitya Samaj and was its member for five consecutive years. I was a member of Utkal State Congress Committee and Central Congress Committee, too. I have been elected as secretary, Cuttack District Congress Committee, and twice a member of All India Women's Conference. I have presided over meetings at Tirupur after being elected the president of Tamilnadu State Women's Conference. Appointed by the Odisha government, I took charge as the supervisor of jails and the Cuttack hospital. I have also been the president of the Arakasi Co-operative Society. I have been elected a member of Ravenshaw managing committee, and, again the secretary of a girls' minor school.

Memories of many such incidents lay hidden in the casket of my mind, but these never touch my heart. Even incidents such as going to jail as the first woman satyagrahi from Odisha in response to Mahatma Gandhi's call or to speak against the war in

1940 and be imprisoned as a member of Utkal Congress pale into insignificance. Later, going to jail by breaking law during the border agitation is not a memorable incident for me. Even to preside over meetings or publish books have not been important to me. I attach no importance to those incidents which happened when I was young, but one event in my political life remains still fresh in my mind.

When I led the Satyagraha movement in Ganjam, I often gave lectures in villages against the British rule. I had been working day and night for two years. I would collect donations from people for party work and prepare people for civil disobedience without being afraid of going to jail. Sri Niranjan Pattnaik, Sri Harihara Pattnaik and others worked with me. I was a workaholic. I had with me my son, who was a child then. I would travel from one village to another carrying him in my arms. I felt quite contented with life. He was not at all naughty or obstinate; it was quite easy to look after him.

After persuading nearly one hundred and fifty people, who went to jail during the civil disobedience movement, my disciple, Sitaramaya (a lawyer of Berhampur) and I boarded a train to Nuapada along with some members of Telugu and Odia Congress. Panchana Kesh Ayar was the sub-collector there. Noticing my growing influence in Ganjam, he once commented, “Sarala Devi certainly knows some black magic. Why else should people get inspired by her lectures and go to jail breaking law? She could even persuade Sashi Rath, editor of *Asha* and Sri Biswanath Das to go to jail!”

I came to know of all this but I never imagined that he would hatch a conspiracy to send me to Vellore jail. I was happily on my way to Nuapada. I had left my son in Chatar, Jagatsinghpur. Our train halted after covering some distance from the Berhampur station. We thought the engine must have developed some trouble. But, a troupe of police constables entered the third class compartment and arrested us, Congress workers, who were travelling to Nuapada.

People shouted, “Hail Mahatma Gandhi”, “Hail Sarala Devi” from inside the train. We were taken to the Chhatrapur court in a police van. I was locked in jail as a ‘B’ class prisoner. While I was being taken to jail, I felt sad at the thought that I would not be able to see my son for six months, but I comforted myself with the thought that to free millions of sons of our country I, an insignificant woman, have taken a risk, and, was now on my way to a unknown place to live in an unfamiliar environment.

The government sent a telegram to our village. My brother and Bhagirathi babu came and took my son with them. On the way, people came and gave me flowers and fruits at every station. They hailed Gandhiji and me. While in the train, I had written an article of about fifteen pages about how I felt when I left my son behind. When I requested the old inspector, who worked in the jail, he sent my article to the daily *Asha* from Madras. When I came back from jail, I found that it had been published in newspapers. In many places in Odisha, women said to me, “We all wept reading your article about your time in jail away from your son.”

In jail, I spent my days in the company of Durgabai Deshmukh, Rukmini and others. Durgabai loved me like a daughter and made my life in jail bearable. And yet, sometimes I wondered how my son, Tikun must be doing in our village, if he would be looking for me when he was unwell. How I struggled to overcome my worries and longings for Tikun during the six months I spent in jail became a memorable experience in my life. In jail, we brought out bangles from our hands, ate only salt and rice and roti. I had to sleep without a bedroll. I was not able to understand Tamil and Telugu spoken by the inmates. All these are my precious memories.

**(Selected from Sarala Devi’s unpublished papers in 2010)**



## Godavari Devi (1916-1993)

Godavari Devi was born into a karana family on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1916, in a village in Jajpur. Her father, Banchhanidhi Das worked as a manager in a company in Madras. Godavari had lost her mother when she was ten, which had created a vacuum in her life. Trying to cope with the loss of her mother, she spent her days in praying and meditating. She also spent her time among the group of girls who met and learnt how to sing festival songs, weave baskets, stitch clothes, and paint with rice paste. She had passed primary classes at her village school but she kept herself updated about the events happening in the country by reading newspapers and magazines.

Godavari joined the freedom movement when she was only thirteen years old. She had taught Mahatma Gandhi the Odia alphabet during his Harijan foot march in Odisha in 1934. During the quit India movement in 1942, she campaigned against the British and was imprisoned for a year. She had established a women's organisation in Balasore in 1946 with the objective of creating awareness and encouraging education among women. She was married to Rabindra Mohan Das, who was also a Gandhian freedom fighter. Between 1934 and 1940, Rabindra Mohan worked as the secretary of Electricity Supply Workers' Union, Calcutta and established trade union organisations in Calcutta, Dhaka, Sirajganja, and Jessore. He was renowned as a trade union leader in Bengal presidency.

Her autobiographical reminiscences, “Punya smrutiru khiye” (Sacred Memories) was serialised in daily newspaper *Prajatantra* from

13<sup>th</sup> December 1968 to 4<sup>th</sup> April 1969. Later, her reminiscences were included in *Punyabati Godavari*, a commemoration volume compiled by Biraj Mohan Das and published in 1997. Though she was unsure about writing her experiences, she wanted to write how villages were deeply involved in making history. She records the agonizing experiences she underwent in her village when she insisted on going to Puri to take part in a Congress training camp in 1931. Her reliance on Gandhi's emphasis upon cultivation of human affection when faced with the hatred of tradition-bound villagers also finds an eloquent expression in it.

The excerpt serves to show how pervasive the influence of Mahatma Gandhi was and how it penetrated even remote villages in Odisha. The incidents Godavari narrates in this fragment reveal how women responded to the forces released by the freedom struggle under Gandhi's charismatic leadership.

## A Tiny Sand Particle

### I

Some women volunteers of our village planned to attend the Congress Volunteer Training Camp at Puri. It was not surprising that my name came first in the list of volunteers from our village.

I and a distantly related aunt of mine prepared ourselves to go to the camp. Her father, Jugal Kishore Das, was a liberal, courageous and educated man. He was dismissed from his job as he had taken part in the uprising against the king in Kanika. He practised as a homeopath in our village and dispensed medicines to poor patients. He used to subscribe to the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and another newspaper. I had read many books at his house. We used to call him Jugal saante. Earlier, whenever a snake bit any villager, a conjuror used to be sent for. He would come and chant mantras and wave his hands over the body of the snake-bitten person. I am not sure how many recovered from snake-bite in this way. Jugal saante was the first to begin applying lokson ointment at the place where a snake stung a person. Once a black cobra had bit my

younger brother; he had set his foot on it while running around in a mango grove. Jugal saante did not let any conjurer come near him. He cured him by applying lokson ointment to the wound.

Since that day, my mother regarded him with deep respect. Our villagers realised that snake bite could be cured by medicines. He was the first to bring a stove that worked with the help of a pump to our village. We had eagerly gone to his house to see the 'machine-hearth'. After he lost his job, his family had to face great financial hardship. His house had been washed away in a flood. He chose to live in a hut with his family, but he never apologised to anyone to get back his job. He died, leaving his family in a helpless and poverty-stricken state, in the same year as my mother, who died for want of proper medication. His three sons and three daughters had to endure much hardship.

The aunt I mentioned earlier was one of his daughters. She was a member of our Kumari Sansad (Association of Unmarried Girls). She loved me dearly. Our villagers never extended any help to her; rather they criticised her for her work. All the same, I used to visit her house and made friends with her sisters as well. Later, when these sisters got married, the family got by with support from their husbands. Aunt wanted to go to Puri to participate in the training camp, but she changed her mind when her mother and other elders forbade her to do so. I had made up my mind to go to the camp. My father worried over my unusual behaviour. He tried to dissuade me, but his words had no effect on me at all.

Many people who read this serialised account assume that I am writing my autobiography; some of them have asked me if I was not writing my autobiography. I am simply writing down some of my memories and giving an account of the way Gandhiji influenced my life. I don't think I can expound the thought of the father of our Nation, who is one of the greatest men of the world. There are many learned people who are equipped to do this. When I describe how I came in contact with the Mahatma, the picture of my village and a few events of the past find their way into the

narrative. When the sun rises in the sky darkness disappears from the earth. Even the tiniest of sand particles reflect the bright rays of the sun. Many learned people in India and abroad embraced Gandhiji's philosophy and many more dedicated their lives to the cause of the freedom movement, giving up lives of luxury. All that I intend to do is to give an account of how his influence shaped the life of an insignificant village girl like me.

I decided to go to Puri, but my father came up with all manner of pretexts to dissuade me. I relied on Lal Bihari Pattnaik, who had set up the Shrama Sansthan Anusthan for sound advice. Besides, Raghunath Das's teachings had left a deep impression. Father sought their help and requested them to dissuade me from going to Puri. He even asked them to find a groom for me. He assumed that marriage would prevent me from serving the country. After my mother passed away, I felt averse towards worldly life. I had made up my mind never to marry. How could I agree to get married when I had already decided to serve my motherland? I had no idea how difficult it was for an unmarried girl to leave home and work outside in a society like ours. I had no option but to become a rebel when my father broached the topic of my marriage.

The day of my journey to Puri drew near. I believed I would be able to go to Puri in spite of my family's objection. At the same time, I also felt guilty. My grandmother had by then become an invalid. I had learnt from her sisters-in-law how she had spent her early life in luxury. After my mother's death, the poor old lady had reared us with great difficulty in extremely trying circumstances. She was lying on her death-bed.

My father's younger brother had migrated to Sadheikala to teach in a primary school. He had lived there for a long time. At this time, he had come on a visit to our village with his family. Father requested him to stay in our house so that his wife could tend my grandmother and look after us. My aunt nursed our dying grandmother. I could not really tend her; the regret for not having done so continues to oppress my heart. She died and was released

from all suffering. Her *dashaba*, the tenth day on which rites are performed for the departed soul, fell on the very day the applicants from our village for the training camp were supposed to set out for Puri. I had got to go. I took bath early in the morning. I bowed to the holy basil plant on the altar in wet clothes. Then I prostrated myself before my father, who sat on the front veranda, brushing his teeth. I informed him that I was going to Puri.

Father did not utter a word, but he suddenly pushed me into an adjacent room and locked it from outside.

## II

That was the day of the *dashaba* of my grandma; my aunt came to take some pots from that room and went out crying. I lay inside that room, still in wet clothes. I could hear the bustle outside as the ritual feast held to feed Brahmins on this day was in progress. I heard some elders saying to father, “Why have you locked Godavari in a room? Open the door.”

“If I opened the door, she would again entreat me to let her go to Puri. I would never allow her to go,” he replied.

At around twelve at night, all work done, aunt and Jani aunt came to me. My wet clothes had dried on my skin. I can still remember—Jani aunt held me by the neck and pushed a sweet into my mouth and poured one or two mouthfuls of water into it. Then they left and the door was again locked from outside. Every day they would open the door when it grew dark as I would not dare step outside at night. One evening, Madhu aunt said out of sympathy, “How long would you survive like this, locked inside a room, without taking any food? Come, let’s escape stealthily. I would take you to Puri.” Lal Bihari Pattnaik’s wife, Bishnupriya Devi had already left for Puri to join the training camp. I told Madhu aunt, “I might never go to Puri, but I wouldn’t go away stealthily.”

I remained imprisoned in that room for two days. Then I was set free. I resumed my usual routine. I helped my father with arranging things in the prayer room. I prepared paans for him. My



aunt, as she was my father's younger brother's wife, did not appear in front of him. My eldest sister had been married off two years ago. My brothers were still very young. One day—it must have been ten in the morning—father was sitting on the front veranda. I handed a paan to him and said that I was leaving for Puri. I touched his feet and marched off towards the village embankment.

I found Nala da and some of his associates at the Shrama Sansthan standing on the embankment when I reached there. Father came after me, shouting. He was followed by around fifteen men holding staves in their hands. Nala da thought they had come to beat me and so he clasped my hand. Father gave me a slap and began to beat Nala da. At the same time, he pulled my hand.

Nala da tried to pacify father while receiving blows from him. Father also beat Nala da's associates. A sort of battle broke out on the embankment, though it had been declared from one side. The other side remained completely non-violent. Between the two parties, stood I. Father had come out with a few villagers to attack Nala da, but he had to face the members of the large Pattnaik family and their supporters. The entire village had gathered there. Nala da was being beaten, but he kept requesting his brothers and supporters not to hit my father.

A crowd of women and children had come up to the embankment. I stood in their midst, stunned. The womenfolk started condemning me. Suddenly, Sundar aunt rushed to the spot. She was a progressive woman of our village. Everyone held her in high esteem. She dispensed home remedies and cured children of minor illnesses. She also gave medicines to patients with eye infection. She was the grandmother of Birendra Pattnaik, a retired chief engineer. She snatched my hands from both Nala da's and father's clutches.

Father said, "Aunt, Godavari will remain in your custody. If she went missing, you'd be held accountable."

That day I stayed at Sundar aunt's house till night. I cursed myself as so many people were beaten black and blue on my

account. Nala da sent some pain-relief ointment for my father in case his hands had got cramps. He had also sent medicines for me. At night, my aunt came and took me home.

Hatred and anger of the whole village hung over me like a fog. This was the ugliest incident in the history of our village. Everyone flung biting words at me and expressed their displeasure. It was but natural. When girls would not even venture into village streets, on account of an obstinate, unruly girl like me, a severe fight broke out on the main road of the village. My father, exercising the powers of a petty landlord, had caused a battle to rage in the middle of the village. The *karanas* and *kbandayats* of our village still looked upon themselves as landlords though some of them had lost their estates. It so happened that even if one could not scrape together three meals a day, one clung to one's pride. Of course, my father felt distressed and guilty afterwards.

I was dumb-struck and I kept myself to myself. And yet, I had not given up, though I had become an object of everyone's contempt and ridicule. At the same time, I could not figure out how I would be able to go to Puri. I found myself completely at a loss. But I was sure of one thing—I had got to go. I was now pitted against my family and nearly the whole village.

Many villagers came and discussed the matter with my father. Some of them remarked, "Why do you try to keep such an unruly daughter at home? Let the shameless girl go wherever she wants." Father would say, "She's lost her mother; I can never let this grown-up girl leave home." I listened to their conversations, lying motionless like a stone. One day, I heard father saying, "As long as I was at home, she would continue this drama." He knew quite well that I would never leave home in his absence and without his knowledge. He left for Cuttack in a huff.

### III

In the meanwhile, the camp for women volunteers was coming to an end. I could not go to Puri to attend it. After the shameful incident on the embankment, I had even stopped going to Shrama

Sansthan Anusthan. Everybody cast an accusing glance at me. I felt too embarrassed to face anyone. My aunt showered reproaches on me all the while. At this time, someone suggested—“You’re sixteen. You can write to the district magistrate and to the police seeking their help saying that you are a grown-up girl, so your father has no right to object to what you want to do. He has forcibly kept you confined at home. You may be provided police protection while leaving home.” I did not like the idea at all. I did not feel it was the proper way to leave one’s home.

The first camp at Puri was already over; the day on which the second camp was to be held drew nearer. I wrote a letter to father informing him that I would go on fast till he allowed me to go to Puri. Why should the threat bother him? He did not even deign to answer my letter. I was left with no other option but to stop taking food. My aunt wrote of this to my father taking the help of a scribe. Two, three days after I went on fast, I heard that the news of my fasting had been published in a newspaper, which said that I wanted to go to attend the camp meant to train volunteers, but my father had kept me locked inside a room. I had, therefore, gone on a fast, so on and so forth.

Bira Kishore Behera, a reformist Harijan (he was a *chamar* by caste; in past, the *chamars* earned their livelihood selling date-liquor) was a member of the Arya Samaj. He had once sent me a copy of the Odia translation of Dayananda Saraswati’s *Satyartha prakasha*. He was the follower of the reformer, Sribatsa Panda and edited an Odia magazine, the *Arya*. He wrote and published an essay, “Well done, Godavari” in this magazine. I came to know of this much later, when our revered leader, Gopabandhu Choudhury showed me the essay in the *Arya* and had a hearty laugh at my expense.

Three, four days had passed since I began my fast. I did not go on a fast as part of a ritual nor did my fast have a religious purpose. I simply wanted to bring about a change in my father’s heart. That was my sole intention. My aunt (father’s sister), Nayan Dei, who had raised us after my mother’s death, tried hard to feed

me. I must have gulped a few morsels of food on a few occasions. Therefore, I would not consider what I observed, strictly speaking, was a fast.

On the fifth day of my fast, my uncle, Gouranga Charan Das received a letter from my father. The letter read:

Dear Gouranga,

Let Godavari go. I don't want to see her face again in my life. Articles on her have appeared in newspapers! One day, Mrs Sarala Devi called out to me at Bakharabad. When I went up to her, she started insulting me.

I said to her, "You may say whatever you like, but Godavari is a grown-up girl. She has lost her mother. In whose custody would I leave her?"

She asked me if I would leave Godavari in her care. I did not agree; so she asked me, "Would you leave her with Ramadevi?"

"If she gave me her word, then I might." I told her. She took me to Ramadevi against my will. Ramadevi promised me that she would take charge of Godavari. If Ramadevi sends any woman to our village, let Godavari go with her. Let her never come back to our house. Tell her, "May one who has disgraced Mukunda Das's family never set foot in his house ever again." I shall never look at her face.

My father's anguish was evident in the letter. That Ramadevi would send a volunteer and I would go with her was something I still could not imagine.

#### IV

On the sixth day of my fast, someone came in the morning and told me, "Nala bhai and Panua bhai are calling you. A lady has come to take you with her." I could not believe my ears. I went out and found an unfamiliar aristocratic bearing woman waiting for me. She was speaking in Bangla. Nala da told me to prostrate myself

at her feet. My happiness knew no bounds when I heard that I would go to Puri with her. She was Binapani Devi, a widow. She was the daughter of advocate Bana Bihari Palit, a landlord and a well-known man in Cuttack. I started packing my things; I needed to take my bedroll and clothes with me, but my aunt did not allow me to. I had kept some hand woven saris at Srimati's house. My brother brought for me two more saris wrapped in a towel from our house without my aunt's knowledge. That was all I carried with me.

I was ready to set off on my journey. If one wanted to go out of Binjharpur avoiding the river route, one had to take the Jajpur route. The only means of travelling to Jajpur from our village was by a bullock-cart. During the rains, the roads turned muddy, and the wheels would sink deep into the mud. The poor bullocks had to drag the cart loaded with travellers and their stuff with great difficulty. The bullock carts, however, were hired only by a few; people by and large went on foot. I bade farewell to everyone before starting my journey. My aunts (father's sisters) stood, their eyes filled with tears. Many villagers must have felt relieved at the sight of the disgrace of the village finally leaving it! My two brothers stood motionless like statues. Indeed, from now on there was no one they could claim as their own. The bonds of love, the pull of which I had never felt before, suddenly seemed to draw me back. The pale faces of my brothers floated before my eyes as I sat inside the cart. True, they could not make me turn away from my chosen path, but I always felt a deep longing for them.

**(“Punya smrutiru khiye,” Punyabati Godavari, pp. 38-48)**



## Annapurna Maharana (1917-2012)

Annapurna Maharana was born on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1917 in Cuttack, Odisha. Her father, Gopabandhu Choudhury and mother, Ramadevi Choudhury were noted freedom fighters of Odisha. She married Sarat Chandra Maharana, a Gandhian freedom fighter, in 1942 and had two sons. As a fish takes to water, Annapurna took to public life and became, at an early age, a member of the vanara sena, the teenager wing in the freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. She went to jail several times for taking part in the civil disobedience movement. She continued to work for the uplift of the poor and the underprivileged throughout her life.

Annapurna Maharana wrote a number of books which include *Sishu siksha sambandhiya rachanabali* (2016), *Sangrami Sarala Devi* (1998), *Bata je dekhaile* (1997), and *Sabu luna lokankara* (1995). She also translated writings of Mahatma Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan into Odia. She has, in addition, written extensively on popular science and socially relevant stories for children. Her autobiographical pieces were published in the literary magazine, *Sucharita* between 1977 and 2001. These were collected and published in the form of a memoir titled, *Amruta anubhav* (An Experience of Bliss) in 2005.

Annapurna Maharana was a keen observer of events unfolding in India before and after independence. Presenting merely a sketchy outline of her personal life and concentrating on her relationship to larger events and achievements, she focused more on her times than herself in her narrative. The excerpts here

show how as an enthusiastic young girl, she was able to establish an instant rapport with Mahatma Gandhi. Nowhere does Gandhi seem more lovable and humane than in her memoir, where she mentions falling in love with the father of the nation at first sight. Gandhi's notion of brahmacharya, in her view, succeeded in bringing a new awareness among women in India.

### **Memories of Childhood**

The story goes back to over sixty-five years ago when I happened to overhear a conversation my mother was having with one of her younger colleagues, whom she treated like a son. He was telling mother—"My three sisters were born before me and the family was sunk in despair because my mother still hadn't borne a son. The fourth child she gave birth to was a boy, but in the dark of the village labour room the midwife, too old and her eyesight dim, couldn't make that out. The moment she declared that the newborn was a girl child, my mother rushed out of the labour room and jumped into the pond at our backyard. Luckily, there were people around to fish her out just in time. Meanwhile, it was found that a son had been born. My mother wouldn't believe it until she had checked it out for herself."

I turned to my mother. "Did you all felt depressed when I was born?"

"My love, by the time you came," said mother, "we're already looking for a match for Benga, your youngest aunt. My mother-in-law was overjoyed that with a new born daughter in our family, we wouldn't have to stop the celebrations of Raja and Kumara purnima which we'd have had to following Benga's wedding."

"The day you're born," said she, "my mother had sent across a huge supply of fish. I cooked several kinds of dishes and sent some to your aunts. At midday, as usual, your grandma and I ate together. Afterwards, she went off to have her nap. She never missed out on her afternoon naps and the games—board games, cowries, cards—that followed when she awoke. That afternoon was no different.

But I remained stuck to my bed, not feeling well. Around four o'clock, the midwife came and called out to me: "Daughter-in-law, get up. It's time to make pancakes. The dough is ready. Tuan will be here from school anytime now." But I couldn't get up. The midwife called out once more, but didn't get a response from me. She ran to my mother-in-law. "Something's wrong with your daughter-in-law. She isn't responding." My mother-in-law threw down the cards in hand and rushed to my side. Shortly afterwards came Sister Annapurna. Word was sent to Doctor Prabhavati Singh. And, then, my dear, you're born."

My mother's first child was a son. My brother was born on 11 October 1915. By that time, my maternal and paternal grandfathers had passed away, so his birth had brought smiles to the members of both the families. That was why my brother was given the name Manmohan.

My mother had gone through a painful labour during my brother's birth. As her mother-in-law stubbornly disapproved medical treatment, she did not let the doctor called by my maternal grandmother come anywhere near mother. Dutī gauduni—then a well known mid-wife in Cuttack helped in the labour. The diet after the delivery also went according to the tradition. My mother suffered from fever. She would be offered to eat steaming hot rice dripping with ghee and mixed with dried ginger powder. Her throat would become dry. There was no chance to gulp down a drop of water as it was not allowed. Mother became seriously ill. Her elder sister-in-law arrived to see her and could comprehend her critical condition. She made her mother aware about the dangerous consequences; only after this, grandma gave her permission to consult a doctor. Mother recovered slowly.

My brother was looked after by my uncle and Benga aunt, and was fed *alenbarij* baby food. At the time of my birth, medical treatment no longer remained a taboo. Sister Annapurna was far-sighted—she massaged me with mustard oil in the sun. After all, a daughter was born to toil in another's household. So what if her



skin became sun-tanned, her bones would be strong! And that happened indeed.

My mother was seventeen; she had already had two children with two years difference between them. She had innumerable household chores which kept her busy since morning till late at night. Her father-in-law had four brothers; she had thirteen aunts-in-law. They would visit our house with their families. I have seen one of them. She was my grandfather's beloved sister, Pira or Priyatama. She was as beautiful as an image of goddess Durga. Her lips would be red like ruby with betel leaf juice. She would arrive after midnight. She came riding a bullock cart from her in-laws' place in Sujanga and accompanied by Saba aunt, Reba aunt, Lakshmi aunt, Paluni aunt, Mani aunt and Dhadia aunt. By the time she reached our house, our doors would be locked and everybody would be in deep sleep. Again, the storeroom would be opened; mother would cook and serve them food. Oxen would be fed with paddy husk and water. By the time all this work was over, one could hear the cries of cuckoos and crow pheasants; a postman would be on his way to work with mails singing a song. Only my mother could offer such hospitality!

My mother's uncles-in-law would also come and stay at our house—Hari grandpa, Shyama grandpa, Gopal grandpa, Raju grandpa, Giridhari grandpa, Jayee grandpa, Bainsi grandpa and others would come frequently. My mother was a god-daughter of Sadei Mohanty of Benkata, and Mani Mohanty, too, took her as a god-daughter. That was why the number of grandfathers was impressive. My mother was adroit at feeding all. In fact, it was her passion. She experienced utmost happiness by feeding people to their satisfaction. Apart from this, she observed numerous fasts and festivals. Innumerable festivities, worships, offering of food to the deity continued almost every day. When would my mother find time from her household affairs to look after her children? My maternal grandmother would send people for this purpose. When my brother was born, she had sent a woman called Budhi. For me came Hadia-ma. She was dark as a pot and fat.

I loved playing with cowries, so Umakanta babu called me—Kauda. I was a cry baby, but the moment I was laid on Hadia-ma's soft and plump thighs, like Dunlop mattress, I would stop crying. She used to call me—Kanduri (cry baby). When my mother was pregnant with me, she could hardly eat anything. She survived sucking barfi all the day. That was why our Nalia-ma called me Barfi. And as I was a bit dumb, our Jagu uncle would call me Hundi (one who is slow-witted). Aunt would call me Deina. My father called me Mani. When I slept in my mother's arms, she would sing lullabies.

In 1920, Biji, Biraja Prasad, my younger brother, was born. He was bright like gold, and had well shaped hands and feet. Such a lovely child! My eldest aunt had remarked that he had inherited our grandfather's looks. He died in infancy. My grandma and ma mourned for him day and night. Mother did not take one of her regular meals for twelve years. I still faintly remember Biji. During that time, short sari and dhoti were available for children. I would be walking wrapped in a sari, my sari-end touching the ground. Biji would be following me smilingly to catch my flowing sari-end—this picture still remains fresh in my memory. Dhai would spread out a mat in the courtyard to rub Biji with turmeric paste. Biji would run away in no time and would not let her catch hold of him. Dhai would call him "Khabisa". He died. My mother had no more children after him.

Dhai's name was Sadhabi. Once there was a famine, and Sadhabi's mother had sold Sadhabi to our great grandfather in return of a measure of rice—at least her daughter would get something to eat even though she had to do menial work. Sadhabi was a beautiful girl. She must have been hardly five or six then. When she was nine, my grandmother, Padmavati came as a bride to this household. Her first child was a son, Kanhei. The son of a fifteen-year-old mother was looked after by a ten-year-old Sadhabi. Sadhabi was meticulous in whatever she did. She would make a paste of turmeric as smooth as butter. If she massaged your limbs, all your fatigue would vanish in no time. Sadhabi massaged the son with turmeric paste, washed his clothes, and did other such work. Once there was some argument

between Sadhabi and the elder daughter-in-law. A mere housemaid would answer back to the mistress of the household? Rati-bou, the elder daughter-in-law, sulked in her room. Coincidentally, Padmavati's husband arrived at home that day.

The eldest brother remarked—"Why should there be disturbances at home on account of a mere housemaid. Let's drive her out."

Sadhabi packed off her rags and bits. Padmavati told her husband, "Send for a palanquin, I'll leave for my parents' house?"

"Why?"

"I can't grind turmeric with a grinding stone to make a paste nor would I manage to wash my baby's potty clothes. Let me leave too."

The proposal for sending Sadhabi away was withdrawn.

In due course, Sadhabi attained puberty and went on to bear a child to Mangaraj Brajasundar. His name was Vidura, who died when he was young. Sadhabi nursed Padmavati's children as her own. After Padmavati's youngest son, Nabakrushna was born, her husband became seriously ill, and so Padmavati remained preoccupied in looking after him. It was Sadhabi who reared Nabakrushna. Sadhabi had died before Nabakrushna married. Before she died, she had given a gold coin to my mother to give it to his future wife. When my mother gave the gold coin to my aunt telling her about Dhai, my uncle's eyes filled.

Out of the eleven children my grandma gave birth to, only four survived. Dhai had looked after them, and later, she looked after us. My great grandmother, Kokila Devi was a mother of eighteen children. All were living, healthy and good-looking. That was why Kokila Devi had made friends with *atharanala*, the eighteen canals in Odisha. If I wrote about these eighteen children, it would be like the old testament of the *Bible*.

My grandma was born in 1869. At that time, no one in her

family thought of a girl learning to read and write. However, my grandma had taught herself. Her younger brother was Harekrushna Mohanty; when he returned from school, she would ask him to write on the wall whatever he had learnt that day. He would write the lessons he had learnt that day at school on the wall. Grandma and one of her aunts, who was hard of hearing, would learn alphabet from this. She had learnt to read in this manner and could read the *Bhagabata*, *Kartika mahatmya*, *Magha mahatmya* and other scriptures. Her memory was so sharp that when anyone of us committed a mistake or pronounced a word wrong while reading the eleventh canto from the *Bhagabata*, she would immediately correct us. Similarly, she had learnt knitting from a Christian lady teacher, who came to teach knitting to my paternal aunts. As she was a skillful painter of patterns, she would draw pictures with the help of a chalk as well. It was her style to teach us alphabets with the help of pictures. She would draw a picture of a cat or a fish and write cat and fish below the drawings and make us learn the letters.

She was extremely strict about manners and etiquette. If she caught someone doing such things as laughing loudly or chewing noisily, joining the conversation among elders, shaking one's legs while sitting on a chair or such ungraceful manners, she would immediately point it out and ask them to behave properly. That was why, everybody behaved properly in her presence.

Later, when her two sons left job and formal education, and gave up the life of luxury to join the freedom movement, life at home no longer remained comfortable. At that time, she renounced all her pleasures and comforts for the sake of her two sons.

I remember—in 1934, when Gandhiji asked for donations for Harijan work, the assembled crowd offered whatever they had to Gandhiji. My grandma was present there. Gandhiji asked her, smiling—“What would you offer me?” She retorted—“You’ve taken everything away from me. You took my sons, my daughters-in-law, my grandchildren—what else is left with me that I would give you?” Gandhiji broke into laughter.

As Padmavati's family members had joined the freedom movement, the police would make a search of her house again and again. But Padmavati would stand before her Bhagabata room and tell the police—"This room belongs to me. I wouldn't allow the police enter this room." The police would retreat without entering into any argument. In that room were stored bulletins and the cyclostyled machine used in printing.

In 1942, during the quit India movement, when all her family members were put in jail except an eleven-year-old grandson and a three-year-old granddaughter, and the government prohibited her to meet them once in a fortnight, this self-respecting woman wrote to the Viceroy how justified it was not to let her meet her family members, after imprisoning all the adults and a mere fourteen year old!

It seemed as though grandfather had been impressed by her personality. Since grandmother loved playing cowries, even though he had law cases, he would play cowries with her. Cowries would produce sound if fell on the ground and it might be a cause for embarrassment—that was why they threw the dices on the bed. I have also heard that both would visit friends and relatives riding their own carriage.

My grandfather had earned reputation as a lawyer. Apart from his practice, he got himself involved in a number of associations such as Utkal Sammilani, Karana sabha, Odia nationalism . He would not hesitate to oppose Madhusudan Das, who was like a mentor to him. He was involved in bringing a candidate for legislative council and the fight against the Bengalis and such activities. This aspect of his personality had been reflected in his youngest son, Nabakrushna. Again, he was heartbroken at the loss of his child and lived with holy man, Charan Das and spent time in repeating the lord's name and singing devotional songs and followed the path of devotion.

Grandma also took recourse at the feet of Bhagavata Gosain when she lost her child. The devotional traits of their personalities

could be traced in their eldest son. In due course, when he became the proud father of a son, there was no limit to his self-indulgence. Grandma would say that he made friends with the king of Kanika and started drinking liquor; besides, he had other lapses as well. Grandma sulked. The storm of misunderstanding blew over their conjugal life. Grandma's mother-in-law, Kokila Devi comforted her—"Let him go wherever he wants, let him commit whatever misdeed he wants. Let him be a drunkard, a debauch—one who would born from your womb would continue the family line, he would offer water at his deathbed." Grandma accepted this argument.

### **Love at First Sight**

Gandhiji decided to devote the year 1934 to the cause of Harijans. He embarked on a tour across the country. It was decided that he would come to Odisha for seven days.

Swami Bichitrananda Das was chosen as the chairman of the reception committee formed to accord welcome to Gandhiji in Odisha. We went on bicycles to enroll people as members of Congress and collect funds. There were three of us—Shobharani Panda, Mangala Sen and I. One had to give only three rupees to become a Congress member; still many people were afraid of donating to the fund, for Gandhi was looked upon as an enemy of the government. To make matters worse, he was trying to remove untouchability from our country!

Apart from persuading people to become Congress members, we also had to concentrate on our studies. We took lessons in Hindi from Pundit Anasuya Prasad. He had come to Odisha in 1931. He took part in the freedom movement and went to jail. After he got released from jail, he dedicated himself to popularising Hindi in Odisha. A National Language Committee was set up under the chairmanship of Swami Bichitrananda Das. Ramadevi was its chief coordinator—collecting funds for and enrolling students in the course being her main responsibilities. Punditji always told us that Gandhiji himself read a letter sent to him if it was written in

a good hand. He always prodded us to practise handwriting. We worked hard at making our handwriting as beautiful as possible. Sri Gokula Srichandan trained us to sing devotional songs; Gopal Ghosh taught us how to play a violin.

Gandhiji came to Puri after completing his tour in Angul. He found the railway station swarming with policemen. When he entered the town, he came to know that the gates of Jagannath temple had been closed by its custodians out of fear that Gandhi might lead untouchables into it. Gandhiji said, “It isn’t possible to change people’s heart in an atmosphere filled with doubt and fear. I’ll tour through Odisha on foot like Shankar and Chaitanya had done in the past.” Once he made up his mind, nothing would deter him. And so, for his historic foot march, preparations began in Puri.

We felt nervous when this news reached us in Cuttack. By this time, people had come from Orilo, Khandaita and other such far-off places and had poured into the Sunshine Field in Cuttack. How would we show our face to people from whom we had collected money for the welcome ceremony of Gandhiji and the donation to be offered to him! We felt discontented with Gandhiji and the coordinators for changing the plans at the last moment. The situation was too embarrassing for us and we were at a loss as to how to break this news to everyone.

Ramadevi wrote to us from Puri—“Gandhiji will camp at Balakati. All of you come here and join his foot march.” Seven of us—Sushila, Mangala, Sobha, Godavari, Manika, Tulasi, and Annapurna—worked in the Harijan settlements. We immediately set off for Bhubaneswar carrying our bedrolls. Fifty years back, there were no bridges on rivers flowing between Cuttack and Bhubaneswar; so no buses were plying to Bhubaneswar like they do now. We travelled to Bhubaneswar by train. From there, we walked along the old pilgrim route to Balakati. The meeting had been already over by the time we got there and everybody had retired to the camp. The “camp” was no dak bungalow or school building—it

was simply the shade of an orchard. Who would shelter Gandhi—an enemy of the British government—in a dak bungalow or in a school? The foot marchers were busy making arrangements for the night. Those who had come from far-off places just to hear Gandhiji and set their eyes on him, but had failed to make it on time, had gathered to have a glimpse of him. They were forcing their way into the camp. The volunteers tried to control them to the best of their ability. This was going on when our group arrived. The moment Ramadevi saw us, she directed us to control the crowd.

We, the volunteers, had been trained by Hindustan Seva Dal! I was dashing out to control the crowd, when I heard an old man calling out affectionately from behind in Hindi—“Hey girl! Where’re you running?” I turned back and saw Gandhiji resting under a tree. A lantern burnt feebly by his side. An English lady, wearing khadi, and another man were busy doing something. I boastfully replied, “To control the crowd.” He gave a toothless smile and said, “All right, go on.” Wasn’t there an expression in English—“love at first sight?” This was precisely what happened to me at that instant. A few words and a smile—it seemed as though we had known each other for ages—Gandhiji became my most intimate, special friend.

We went on the foot march twice a day. Early in the morning, Gandhiji would wake everyone up, beating his brass mug with a spoon. His files, papers, tooth-stick, boiled water, glasses, would be kept near him at night so that he did not have to search for these and waste any time doing so, and would find everything within his reach. Sushila Pai had come up with an adjective for his mug—“Multi-Purpose.” He used this mug while brushing his teeth, taking bath, in the toilet, and also when he drank goat’s milk. Sushila Pai had suggested that, after Gandhiji’s death, this mug should be preserved in a museum, bearing a note in how many ways it was used by him.

When we heard the wake-up call, we would get up and hurriedly go through our chores and prepare ourselves for the morning prayer session. Kaka Kalekar oversaw the prayer session,



which was held in the following manner—first, we sang *pratab smaramy* and followed it up with other devotional songs. After the prayer, the foot marchers had breakfast, which was offered by the villagers. We had for breakfast rice flakes, jaggery, curd, coconut and mangoes. Carrying light essentials, volunteers would prepare to go on the march, leaving the heavy things at the camp. The marchers who belonged to the locality had some additional responsibilities: to throw all the used leaves into a pit, to dig latrines and to oversee if the cooking pots were kept in a proper place.

Until the hour of the commencement of the march, Gandhiji would remain immersed in writing letters or discussing something with people. Then, suddenly, he would look at his watch, check if his bag and the first-aid kit were ready, and without calling anyone would start walking. It seemed as though he had a sixth sense which told him the time. When it was time to eat, he would look at his watch, and it would be the exact time at which he had food every day! The moment Gandhiji started walking, we would follow him. If anyone lagged behind due to absentmindedness or for some work, he would have to run, gasping for breath, because Gandhiji walked very fast indeed, and sometimes, he ran if he thought it was necessary to do so. Usually, he would lay his hands on the shoulders of two persons and walk on while engaging them in a discussion. He acquainted himself with people in the course of the walk. When Gandhi started running, the condition of the two persons by his side became extremely difficult!

The bedrolls of the foot marchers, the records of the mobile office of the Sevak Sangh, the typewriter—all these were carried on a cart to the next resting place. Once, a foot-marcher from Bombay fell ill during the march. Gandhiji suggested that the person should travel on the cart and all others should carry his bedrolls. As we had been trained by the Seva dal, we carried the bedrolls on our shoulders and were applauded by the Mahatma himself.

Love is a powerful force, as powerful as the gravitational pull. Love drew people from far and near to Gandhi. All along the

way, crowds poured in to see him. The moment they saw Gandhi, the air would resound with the sound of ululation and *haribol*. The villagers would join Gandhi on the way and march forward, singing. They were always cautious while walking to make sure that dust from their feet would not rise and cover Gandhiji.

By the time we reached our resting place, people from far and near would already have gathered there. Gandhiji would start addressing them immediately. To get rid of a sin like untouchability, to overcome laziness, to give up drinking alcohol, to maintain cleanliness—he would exhort them to do all these. He would persuade the womenfolk to give up wearing jewellery and come out of purdah. At every meeting, he would repeat that one who lived off others was no better than a thief. Gandhiji gave his speeches in Hindi. Rajkrishna Bose translated them into Odia, and in his absence, Gopabandhu Choudhury would do this job. After the meeting, Gandhiji himself would ask for donations. People donated different things, ranging from bamboo baskets to gold chains and bangles. Afterwards, Gandhiji himself auctioned these things. We, too, went round among the crowd and asked for donations, spreading our sari ends. People even gave an *adbala* or a *pabula*; their faces shone while offering these to us. How much one gave did not matter; what mattered was how sincerely one gave something.

When the meeting was over, we would help in chopping vegetables and making rotis. This done, we would set out for the Harijan settlements in the neighbourhood. Our task included, among other things, cleaning the colonies, bathing Harijan children, and teaching them how to sing *ramadbun*. Professor Lala Achintarai, Krishna Menon, Kaka Kalekar and other leaders, who had come from outside Odisha, also accompanied us to Harijan settlements. Damodar Das Munjada, Debaraj and Prithviraj assisted Thakkar Bapa in managing the office, typing, keeping accounts, and replying to letters. Mirabehn and Sushila Pai helped Gandhi in writing letters. Prabhavati Devi, Jayaprakash Narayan's wife, cooked food for Gandhi, boiled goat milk for him and attended to other such things.

Balaji Govindji Desai, who wrote articles for the weekly *Harijan*, started reading *Niladri mahoday*. He learnt Odia from us to be able to read the history of Odisha. He was such a studious person that he read books even while walking. Uma, Jamnalal Bajaj's daughter, was the youngest, the fattest and the most mischievous among the marchers. Though she belonged to a rich family, she endured all the hardships of the Harijan march without complaint. Pundit Nilakantha Das and Gopabandhu Choudhury apprised the guests who had come from outside on floods and other problems affecting Odisha. Uma Bajaj would take down notes and give these to Gandhiji. On some days, Gandhiji would make a speech, relying on these notes and those we had scribbled during our visits to the Harijan quarters. Whenever he did so, our hearts would fill with pride. It was in Gandhiji's nature to make the insignificant feel valued. The foot marchers included a sahib from Germany. He was a Nazi. Rajkrishna babu teased him playfully, saying, "Nazis are pazis."

The Congress workers from Odisha were assigned numerous responsibilities. Before the march for the day began, Gunanidhi Pattnaik and Surendra Pattnaik would go in advance to the resting place to check if proper arrangements had been made there. As the secretary of Harijan Sevak Sangh, Ramadevi remained in overall charge of the foot march. Rajkrishna babu served as the translator of Gandhi's speeches as "his master's voice". Gopabandhu Choudhury coordinated all the activities. Manmohan Choudhury and Binode Kanungo served as reporters; the latter also worked as a photographer. Jagannath Satpathy from Kujang remained in charge of cooking and made sure the cooking was finished on time. Ishwarlal Vyas was the bell ringer. He would indicate time by beating a brass plate with a ladle. Sometimes Pundit Lingaraj Mishra, Pundit Nilakantha Das, Malati Choudhury, Radhanath Rath, Satyanarayan Sengupta would drop in to meet Gandhiji. Agatha Harrison came from England and Pierre Ceresole from Switzerland to spend time with Gandhiji. Minoo Masani, Biyogi Hari, Satish Chandra Dasgupta were among others, who had travelled to Odisha to meet Gandhiji.

After having lunch and resting themselves for a while, the learned guests, who had come from outside, would address us. Biyogi Hari spoke on the history of Hindi literature. Satish Chandra Dasgupta talked to us about Harijans and their problems. Again, we would finish eating before sunset and set out for the next resting place. On the way, people would gather, conches would be blown, and devotional songs would be sung. We would offer our evening prayers after reaching the resting place. The meeting would start, afterwards, people would be asked to make donations. After this, the foot marchers would make arrangements for spending the night at the resting place. Most of the days, we would settle on the banks of a river or in an open field at the outskirts of a village. Rarely did we spend the night at someone's house.

In this way, covering a long distance, the foot marchers reached Kajipatna near Cuttack. In the scorching sun of May, we walked all over the town announcing that there would be a public meeting on the banks of river Kathjodi in the evening. The huge crowd that gathered in the evening made us forget our pain. Swami Lalnath, Pundit Parikshit Das Sharma and others came in a procession to show black flags to Gandhiji. People started shouting at them angrily. Gandhiji requested the crowd to give way and allow the demonstrators to come to the dais. As the sea had parted to make way for the Hajrat Moses, the sea of humanity parted silently to make way for the demonstrators. Gandhiji requested Swami Lalnath to deliver his speech.

The shaven-headed monk glittered like molten gold in his saffron robe. He gave a brilliant speech, in which, quoting from scriptures, he proved that untouchability was sanctioned by Hinduism. After his speech, it seemed but natural that the speech made by Gandhi—meditative, frail, with lean hands and a big nose—would have no impact. But nothing but truth prevails in the universe. Gandhiji said softly but with firmness in his voice—“Untouchability could never be a part of mankind's religion. This was not something sanctioned by Hinduism. If Hindu scriptures

sanctioned this sin, I would not follow this for the sake of humanity.” The place reverberated with the sounds of people hailing Gandhiji.

In the evening, Gandhiji gave a lecture at a women’s meeting at Sri Ramachandra Bhavan; he collected some jewellery as donations there and then went to visit Bhikari Charan Pattnaik’s Cottage Industry Association. To escape the crowd, he slipped out of it through a backdoor and walked up to the railway station. It had been decided that he would go to Patna and attend the meeting of All India Congress Working Committee. Before he left, he stroked our heads and said, assuring us—“I’ll come back.”

He kept his promise. At the Bairi station, the mail train halted and he got down from it and headed straight for the ashram at Champapur. The foot march was resumed from there.

At the Champapur ashram, Gobinda Mishra had established a charitable hospital. Pointing at this, Gandhiji said, “One who wanted to serve the country should not construct a concrete building and give medicines to a few patients. Instead, one should live in a hut among the villagers and teach them about hygiene and cleanliness and how to lead a healthy life so that they would never suffer from any illnesses.” On his way to Bahugram, he pointed to a spot where someone had defecated—“This is a sin. This sin should be removed from our country.” In this manner, he would harp on vices such as untouchability, laziness, lethargy, dirtiness, love of luxury, greed for jewellery, and practice of purdah. He walked through villages such as Champapurhaat, Bheda, Lekhanapur, Satyabhamapur, Bahugram, Shishua, Jiginipatapur, Nischintakoili, Kakatia, Salar, Baliabhagabatpur, Tarapur, Barimula, Indupur, Annyasipur, Bari, Sahasagobindapur, Purushottampur, and reached Budhaghat.

Nothing at all escaped his attention. Where the mango peels were thrown, when someone stepped on a splinter during the march, when someone went down with fever, whether the leftover food such as rice or bread were utilised properly, whether all the toilets were covered with soil before leaving a camp—he

would look into all these small details and, at times, he would advise us on how to pay attention to them. At the same time, he had to think about the welfare of our entire country. Just at this time, an earthquake wrecked Bihar and left it in a devastated condition. He discussed with Pierre Ceresole, an engineer from Switzerland, ways of rehabilitating the people and reconstructing the villages there. It was decided that Pierre Ceresole would travel to Bihar to form an idea of the situation. He would come back and return to Bihar after a few days to start the reconstruction work after consulting Gandhiji. Minoo Masani had come to inform him about the goals and objectives of the newly-formed Congress Socialist Party.

Every day, Gandhi would sit before a pile of letters and write out replies to the questions asked by people, which were published in the *Harijan*. When his right hand went stiff, he would start writing with the help of his left hand. In this way, this man with myriad facets to his personality marched along untrodden paths embodying the ancient mantra—*chareibeti, chareibeti*.

At Budhaghat, it suddenly started pouring with rain after the meeting was over in the evening. There were no villages nearby. Gandhiji and the foot marchers had to huddle themselves inside a small grocery shop that night. Some took shelter in a hut. While singing songs and reciting poems to pass time, they suddenly realised that people from every part of India had come together in that small hut.

It rained every evening from that day onwards; so Gandhiji went to the children's shelter at Bhadrak from Todanga and from there journeyed to Wardha. Before he left, he said at a worker's meeting at Bhadrak that everyone should go and work in villages. Someone asked—"What would we do in villages?"

In his reply, Gandhiji told us a story—"Once a pregnant lioness delivered her cub just as she was jumping on a herd of sheep to catch her prey. The cub grew among the sheep and started feeling scared of tigers and lions. One day, another lion out on the prowl found to his utter surprise that a lion cub also fled in panic

with a herd of sheep. The lion caught hold of the cub and took it to a spring and said—‘Look at our reflections on the water and compare them. You, too, are a lion like me. Why are you afraid of me?’ The lion cub now realised who he really was and went away with the lion. Go to villages and awaken the lion which lies dormant within the villagers. As a result, they would become fearless and enlightened.”

Gandhiji took leave of us and boarded the train at Bhadrak railway station. He was a great man, who was regarded as an epoch-maker all over the world. And I, an insignificant person, *actually* walked with him, talked to him, laughed with him, had an opportunity to share my feelings with him, and received his love like an innocent child! Now, when at the dusk of life I remember the experience, I am filled with such happiness that my heart yearns to express it through a song written by Rabindranath—

So beautiful!

Who knows for what good deed of mine

once a forest flower like me

was sown into the garland adorning your neck.

That moment, in the first ray of the sun,

the earth looked beautiful, awakened from slumber

the song from a veena

filled the sky and the earth.

Now, at the end of a tired day,

the light is no more,

A bird sings a sleepy song

weary at last

flowers drop on to the earth

in the evening breeze in the dark,

wither on the path you walked on.

And yet, the will to purify one’s consciousness, the endeavour to bring about change in society—how could these be fulfilled without the Almighty’s blessings?

## Circle of Love

Vinoba's ideas helped me understand Gandhi's philosophy better. "Women are the gateway to hell", "Women and wealth lead to the downfall of men," "Men who seek salvation or who want to lead a spiritual life should keep away from women"—I have always felt that such teachings so routinely dispensed in spiritual discourses create a sense of inferiority among women. I have also seen among women a tendency to denigrate other women using these terms. Gandhiji's views on the matter were quite the opposite. Though Prince Lakshman was regarded as a model celibate in scriptures, Gandhi had rejected his kind of celibacy, which advocated absolute abstinence and staying away from temptations. He held that it was better to know how to handle fire than avoid going near it lest one might burn one's fingers. And for this, he could bring about such an awakening among women in our country.

Vinoba brought a different dimension to the principle of detachment. One could not lead a spiritual life if one did not detach oneself from one's children and family, and if one had no control over one's desire for wealth and luxury. Love for one's children and family motivated human beings to work. One had to detach oneself from all these ties in order to attain salvation—this had been a celebrated philosophical position. Elsewhere, Rabindranath Tagore wrote, "To remain detached in order to attain salvation is not possible on my part; in the midst of infinite bondage, I shall relish the joyous taste of salvation."

Vinobaji took the philosophy of detachment to a higher level and said that one should actually expand one's love and attachment to enable them to encompass the whole world. The fulfillment of one's life lies in expanding one's circle of love. The wider the circle of love, the easier it becomes to achieve happiness. The ability and the desire to earn wealth remain strong in oneself, but one should not spend the wealth one earns on one's family alone, but spend it on society at large.



He advocated this principle citing examples from Russia. In Russia, farmers were given ownership of some land when collective farming failed to produce the desired amount of harvest. Similarly, in India, he said, one should donate some land to the village committee, which would be cultivated in a cooperative manner and keep some land as personal property. One should cultivate one's private interests in such a way that the individual interest did not clash with the interests of society. He had placed his views before the government. Through this philosophy, he was trying to persuade all to expand their love, and to see oneself as part of a larger context. He believed this would lead to universal amity.

As a woman and a mother, I could never understand how this animate, beautiful world could be an illusion. I could easily relate to Vinoba's idea of expanding one's love. I recalled my personal experience. When I gave birth to my first child, I felt as though I had completely exhausted my wealth of love on him. When I became pregnant for the second time, I was afraid that I had no more love left within me to give to my second child. I felt as though I had given all my love to my first child. I wondered how sinful it would be to deprive the second child of my love. And yet, when my baby was born, I loved him as dearly as I loved my first-born. I was amazed by this experience. Vinoba preached universal love through expanding one's circle of love. I could realise the truth of this philosophy in my personal life, in loving my two children equally. I realised that the human heart was capable of so much love that its spring of love would not dry up even after it gave love to the whole universe. I felt reassured by this idea of love, which one experienced by overcoming selfishness.

**(Amruta anubhav, pp. 210-220; pp. 344-345)**



## Annapurna Das (1922-2005)

Annapurna Das was born on 22 June 1922 in Kuansa, Bhadrak. Her father was Radhakrishna Das and mother, Savitri Devi. Her father worked as a sub-inspector of schools in Odisha. She studied at Ravenshaw Girls' School, and then graduated from Ravenshaw College with Odia honours in 1947. She had first seen Mahatma Gandhi in 1934 during his Harijan foot march in Odisha and felt drawn to the ideals he espoused and joined the freedom movement. She served at Kasturba Gandhi Memorial Trust during 1960-1969. She also took part in the Bhoodan movement and travelled all over India. She left an impressive body of writing on social issues and on the relevance of Gandhi and Vinoba. She also wrote a biography of Gopabandhu Choudhury, *Lokaratna Gopabandhu* (1994).

Her autobiographical fragment, “Mo piladina akhire Bhadrak” (Bhadrak in my Childhood) was published in *Sikha*, a bi-monthly magazine published by Sikshasandhan, a resource centre for Education in 2005. As the title suggests, it contains her reminiscences of her childhood and how her village changed during the freedom movement. One gets a glimpse of Bhadrak in those days through her eyes. In addition, the discriminations based on caste and gender prevalent in society find a mention. She belonged to an era when experiments with building a democratic nation and a new social order were being carried out, and yet, her narrative shows that her basic preoccupations always extended far beyond politics. Her narrative reveals a person with a highly individualistic outlook and a strong belief in the essential dignity of human beings.

## Bhadrak in my Childhood

Daughters in Odia Hindu families used to put veils on their heads even inside their houses. When girls were hardly eight or nine, they would do so whenever they stepped out of home. I found the same practice prevalent among the girls in Kuansa, too. At that time, girls belonging to Christian or Brahmo families got an opportunity to receive higher education, and take up jobs in education or health departments. Among Odia women, Bina Dei and her younger sister, Jyotsna Dei were the first to become doctors. Gradually, our society overcame its resistance to girls' education. I never saw any girl going to school in Kuansa; the number of young girls and married women who could read scriptures was dismal. Phakirmohana's story "Rebati" was based on the superstition prevalent in society—if a girl was educated, calamity would strike her family and cause her parents' death. A daughter was destined to leave her parents' home and become part of another family; her right place was near the hearth in the kitchen. Such a belief had struck deep roots in people's psyche.

I don't know why I was destined to be different. I always worked determinedly against such superstitions. I was filled with affection and kindness towards others; I would never hurt others or embarrass others on grounds of caste. I felt a deep devotion for the Almighty.

Elderly women of our village would often urge me to draw the veil over my head. I would reply, "If someone feels shy, let her draw a veil over her head. I don't feel shy at all." I was not allowed to swim in river. And yet, I would swim, like a fish, in river Salandi in spate in the company of my brothers. My father supported my views, which further strengthened my resolve. I would never put up with the way daughters were discriminated against sons in families. I always endeavoured to do whatever the boys did. I had a strong desire to pursue higher education, which the boys received. I could book a bus or train ticket on my own; I had the courage to travel all by myself from one place to another by train.

I could split a piece of wood with a saw. I had also taught

myself how to chop wood with an axe. I felt no fear. My father and my eldest brother, Golak Chandra Das, encouraged me not to be afraid of anything or anyone.

Our way of life underwent a change when we came to Bhadrak. At first, I felt out of place there, but, gradually, I got used to the new surroundings. The roads were wide and long in Angul, where one could run in joyous abandon. True, there were no such roads in Kuansa. So what? I would run from one place to another the moment I was called for! I played with both boys and girls. We would dig a bear-hole and play over heaps of sand. We would come home as soon as the sun set fearing that bears might appear.

When I was a child, I would become absentminded looking at the riot of colours in the sunset sky. I would experience a melancholic joy while gazing at the setting sun. No one had any share in the feelings that filled me in these moments. How would I get an opportunity to go through such experiences in Kuansa? We used to go to river Salandi to take bath. I saw the beds of kasatandi flowers stretching along the riverbank; a police station lay below the embankment. A few sahibs came to take a stroll to this place. My elder brothers passed through this place to play with their friends. There were also a few shops in Nua bazaar. A post office and a hospital stood on that side. I would visit the riverbank every day, stand alone and watch the sunset. When darkness fell, I would come back home.

\* \* \*

I heard my father tell us several times about a Brahmin classmate of his who studied with him in Ravenshaw College. One day, the hostel cook served curry to my father in the Brahmin boy's bowl. The Brahmin friend became furious when he learnt of this; he used the bowl only after it was washed and heated in the fire. The Harijans also received similar treatment although they believed in Hindu gods and goddesses. Children belonging to higher castes did not touch the feet of elderly persons belonging to lower castes as a mark of respect to them. Once I touched my forehead with my hands to show respect to Koili nani, belonging to a lower caste (she

was a child-widow, aged and was known to everyone in our house) when my leg touched her body. Other women, who were present there, remarked, “Annapurna is a chandi. She’s totally ignorant about the ways of the world.”

“God also exists in her. She’s as old as my parents. What’s wrong if I show respect to her?” What I said made everyone laugh. When I told of this to my father, he reassured me, saying, “You’ve done the right thing.”

If I touched a Harijan child, our villagers would tell me, “Go and take a bath.” I would refuse to do so and ask my father, “Why should I wash my clothes? Doesn’t god exist in him?” My father would take my side; this would calm me. On the day of the Raja festival, I would eat pancakes at the houses of lower-caste villagers. I would be rebuked at home and by villagers for this. Everybody would say, “She’s tomboyish. It’s futile to explain anything to her.” I would untie Gobinda bou, the washer woman’s sari end and take out a paan, and eat it. She would feel very uncomfortable, but would not say anything out of affection. I treated barber woman, Saria aunt like my own aunt and lavished on the barber, Shama bhai the affection I felt for my own brother. Even today, his sons call me aunt, and my brothers, uncle. Rama Thatari read the scriptures after evening prayers were sung at our house. He was like our elder brother.

Girls in our village wore gold and silver ornaments on their necks, ears and hands. I only wore deformed bangles on my hands. Father had explained to me that women were decked with ornaments, which were meant to keep them in captivity as slaves. I had realised the truth in his words. I had decided that I would not become anyone’s slave. I was a slave of god, not of human beings. I decided to remain independent and studied up to BA. In course of time, the gates of higher education opened for girls in Bhadrak and girls’ education has now become mandatory. And I, an educated woman of those times, wander from village to village doing social work.

**(“Mo piladina akhire Bhadrak,” Sikha, pp. 60-61, pp. 74-75)**



## **ACTIVISTS**

**Nirupama Rath**

**Sumani Jhodia**

## **Nirupama Rath (1926-2011)**

Nirupama Rath was born in 1926 in Chandola, Cuttack. Her father, Chaturbhuja Mohanty was a highly placed government servant in the Education Department. She was adopted by her mother's sister and her husband. She lived with them in Cuttack. Her maternal uncle, Jayakrishna Pattnaik was a freedom fighter. His two sons, Ananta Pattnaik and Guru Charan Pattnaik were also reared by Nirupama's foster mother, and they became leaders of the socialist movement in Odisha in their youth. Nirupama studied medicine at Srirama Chandra Bhanj Medical College, Cuttack from 1945-1950 and went on to become a renowned gynecologist.

Breaking social conventions based on caste, she married Gangadhar Rath, an advocate, going against the wishes of her family. She was a founder fellow of Indian Medical Association. She also served as the Odisha state president of Indian Medical Association from 1987-2000.

As a student, she participated in various students' movements in the country. She was drawn towards communism and socialism as a way of building an ideal social order and led a number of agitations and movements in Odisha. She always raised her voice against state oppression and injustice during her life time. In recognition of her work, she was conferred with the Soviet Land Nehru Award in 1972, National Unity Award in 1993 along with other coveted medical and literary awards.

She has written numerous books and essays on women's issues, particularly on women's health and child care. Her books

include *Shishuswasthya* (1972), *Prasuti Bijnana* (1976), *Kanya* (1991), *Nari o ain* (1995). Her autobiography, *Alibha smruti abhula anubhuti* (Eternal Memories, Unforgettable Experiences) was published in 2004. Nanda Kishore Pattnaik, the famous trade union leader of Odisha, contributed an introduction to the book. In the following excerpt, she describes at length her days as a student leader and her involvement with a number of socio-political movements in Odisha and beyond.

### **My Life as an Activist**

I had never thought that participating in social and political movements would become a part of my life. I don't know how a rebellious spirit had grown in me without my knowing it. The blood flowing in my veins seemed to swell while fighting against injustice, immorality and corruption. Even as a child my blood used to boil like larva flowing from a volcano whenever I heard the helpless cries of the poor. My ardent nature must have helped grow a revolutionary spirit within me against social injustice and exploitation. As a result, I was drawn into various mass movements, students' movements, and movements of the poor, the exploited, and the unlettered.

I was involved in students' movements at state and national levels. I took part in various students' movements even when I was a young girl. These movements laid the foundation of my future career. My political life—getting involved in the freedom movement, organising agitations—sprang from my involvement with the students' movement.

### **Garjat Movement**

For the present generation, the Garjat movement might seem ancient history, but for those who took part in it, it was an arduous struggle. People fought against the king's rule; at the same time, they had to participate in the freedom movement. In 1938, girl students were mobilised against the tyrannical rule of the king of Dhenkanal in response to the call of Praja mandal movement. I travelled to Dhenkanal to take part in this movement.



Between 1942 and 1947, the movement against the British reached its peak. In 1942, Gandhiji led the Quit India movement. I completely immersed myself in the movement. I would repeat Gandhiji's call, "Do or Die" at gatherings held at schools, colleges, and rallies.

In 1946, I formed the Girl Students' Association with the aim of bringing girls into our movement with help from friends such as Nandini Satpathy and Savitri Acharya. The Union Jack was pulled down from the tower of Ravenshaw College on 18 December 1946 under the leadership of Manmohan Mishra and Basanta Mishra. I, Nandini Satpathy, Shamali Lahiri took a leading role in this event.

On another occasion, the field near Gouri Sankar Park swarmed with students and leaders. I led a procession, which started from Ravenshaw College. When the procession reached Buxi Bazaar a group of British policemen intercepted the procession to arrest us. But we marched on saying that only a lady police could arrest us. The British police rushed towards us, pointing bayonets at us. We did not pay any heed to them and thrashed a policeman and continued the procession. While all this was taking place, the police kicked a girl called Urmila. I can never forget our face-off with the police on the main roads of Cuttack that day. A huge meeting was held at Gouri Sankar Park, which was chaired by me. Rangadhar Biswal and other friends of mine took me away after this meeting; I went underground. The police searched for me but in vain.

### **Constructing an Embankment**

By 1946, the Quit India movement had entered its final phase. We intensified our efforts to drive the British out of India. At that time, we received a request from the inhabitants of Patia to get an embankment built along river Kuakhai, which would save inhabitants of Patia from floods. We went there along with some well-wishers. I was accompanied by Jayanti Mohanty, Bhabanti Mohanty, Sabitri Mishra and others from the Girl Students' Association.

The song, "chala kodala, chala kodala, Patia bandhe, chhande

chhande” written for the occasion by Manmohan Mishra inspired everyone. All carried baskets full of soil and emptied them on the embankment, singing the song. Gangadhar Rath was also a part of this initiative. Ah! Such ecstasy! The earth reverberated with the sounds of cymbals and drums as everybody danced and sang. We would compete with each other to empty baskets full of soil on the embankment with great enthusiasm. At last, we constructed an embankment, which was seven miles long. It still stands as a symbol of pride of the residents of Patia. I feel nostalgic whenever I pass by it recalling that I had also thrown a handful of soil to build this.

Memories of how we worked on the embankment are still fresh in my heart. The sky and the air reverberated with slogans—“We shall build the embankment.” “Red Salute to Farmer Brothers,” “Long Live the Revolution.” Even now these echo in my ears. Everyone dreamed of a village where no one would remain hungry. It was as though a stream of happiness flowed through the crowd. Villagers gathered at the site of work with cymbals and drums and danced with us. How can I ever forget all this?

India attained freedom on 15 August 1947. As the great day approached, the students’ movement grew in strength. Students’ agitation continued to drive the British away from the country. On 30<sup>th</sup> January 1947, a huge procession was organised in Cuttack. I led the procession; when it reached Chandini Chowk, a meeting, presided over by me, was held there.

In 1947, we performed a play at the auditorium of Sri Rama Chandra Bhawan. The play satirised the British Empire. It created a stir in Cuttack and filled the movement against the British with new enthusiasm. Bhabani Mohanty, Nandini Satpathy, Rajashree Dala Behera had acted in this play.

### **Border Agitation, 1955**

The police started firing at people agitating in front of the AIR station in Madhupur and an innocent young man called Sunil got killed in the firing. I and some women comrades of mine, who had

taken part in the border agitation, received this news. We went to the spot and took part in the agitation. I was also anxious for my husband, Gangadhar Rath, who stayed there till the end despite the police firing. Malati Devi led a procession of medical students to the AIR station—but the police intercepted them at Buxi Bazaar. In this way, the movement to unite all the Odia-speaking tracts led to agitations at important places in Cuttack such as the Radio station, the Collectorate, Ravenshaw College and Medical College. I did not care for my medical practice and took part in the agitation every day along with my comrades and colleagues, forgetting that we may be hit by police bullets or batons of Gorkha soldiers.

During the agitation, a long procession reached the Collectorate surrounded by Gorkha soldiers. I took part in this procession along with others and delivered a short speech at the meeting held there. As I felt restless day and night, I organised group meetings in slums and colonies to mobilise people in favour of the movement.

Even after India gained independence, a few Odia-speaking tracts lay dispersed in different states. Sadheikala and Kharasuan were merged with Bihar. This pained me and created a feeling of rebellion in my mind. We kept our professional commitments and business aside for a while and dedicated ourselves to the task of bringing together all the dispersed Odia-speaking tracts.

### **Kamgar Movement**

About twelve participants from Odisha went to Bombay to participate in a meeting of the All India Students' Federation in 1947. Sadananda Mohanty, Biswanath Sahu, Banshidhar Satpathy, Akhil Mohan Pattnaik, Narasingha Panda were among the members of this team. I was the only woman among the representatives sent from Odisha. The first session of the conference was held in a large hall in a three-storied building. Sadananda babu was our team leader. He told me—"You're a woman; don't go out alone anywhere till I come back." Saying this, he left. In the mean time, we were asked to take part in a procession, which had been declared unlawful.

B.G. Kher was then the chief minister of Maharashtra. Morarji Desai was the home minister. The government had banned the scheduled procession of the students' union. I marched at the head of the procession along with Gita Mukherjee and Kalpana Joshi. Students decided to defy the ban and marched ahead despite opposition from the police and the military personnel. The procession looked like an ocean of humanity. At this moment, if a plate had been rolled over the crowd, it would not have fallen on the ground. We gave slogans such as—*Lift the ban, Inquilab zindabad; Shame to Government of Bombay.*

We were tear-gassed when we passed along a road that ran from central Bombay towards the Kamagar field. Our vision became blurred. Blank shots were fired into the air. Men, women, girls stood on terraces and poured buckets of water on us and threw onions at us so that our eyes would not burn. We received overwhelming sympathy from everyone. My eyes burnt severely and became red like the eyes of a crow pheasant. I looked at them, my eyes wide open. I wondered how sensitive people were. In the midst of bursting tear gas, shells, blank firing, lathi charge and the crowd, we marched towards Kamagar field. I did not know where the representatives from Odisha had vanished. I was ready to face death for my country.

We entered the Kamagar field. Rosa Deshpande was with me. Guns were pointed at the students. The military loudspeaker warned us against entering the field, but we marched on. Firing started. I threw myself on the ground as I had heard that bullets would not hit a person lying on the ground. I pulled Rosa down but she could not understand what I wanted her to do—she was seriously injured in the firing and lay covered in blood. I was also slightly injured, but I rolled on the ground and dragged Rosa to the other side of a broken wall which stood nearby.

My condition had become critical. Our senior comrades such as Ganesham had escaped successfully. They knew how to escape unhurt in such situations. We lifted Rosa to the other side

of the broken wall. I was gasping for breath. Ganesham and other comrades saluted us. The representatives from Odisha could not find me. They presumed that I was dead. They were desperately searching for me. When we met, I was reproached by Sadananda babu and other representatives. Later, a meeting was held at the Shivaji Park. As I was the only woman from Odisha, I was invited to the dais. I felt proud when I was heartily applauded by the audience at the end of my speech. When the meeting was over, Comrade Gita Mukherjee and senior students from different states lavished praise on me.

**(Alibha smruti abhula anubhuti, pp. 59-68)**



## Sumani Jhodia (b. 1963)

Sumani Jhodia is a tribal leader from Siriguda village under Kashipur block in Rayagada district of Odisha. Her father, Ravi Jhodia was a ward member in Kashipur. Sumani went to a village school for some time but she dropped out. Sumani got married to Govind Jhodia, a farmer, when she was very young.

For years, Sumani has been waging a crusade against the sale of liquor in her area, demanding the tribals' right over minor forest produce and challenging the government's decision to lease out tribal land to private companies for setting up industries. She was appointed an adviser on tribal development by Biju Patnaik, the former Chief Minister of Odisha, in 1995. She was conferred the Rani Gaidinliu Stree Shakti Puraskar by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, in 2001 in recognition of her exceptional service to the tribal community in Odisha. Sumani serves as the president of Ama Sangathan, an organisation consisting of several tribal groups. She is also a member of the state's Tribal Advisory Committee. She was recently appointed as director of Mandibisi Millets Farmer Producer Company Limited, which is registered with the Ministry of Corporate Affairs, Government of India.

Sumani's memoir, *Muin Sumani kabuche* (Sumani Speaks) was published in 2005. It is an oral narrative which was transcribed for the purpose of publication. She narrates in it the story of her ancestors, tribal way of life, and her work at the grassroots level among tribals. Even though a school dropout, Sumani's dedicated

work at the grassroots level make her one of the foremost tribal activists in India. The following excerpt brings to light her first crusade against the sale and manufacture of *bandia*, country liquor. The success of the Self Help Group for women formed by her proves that Sumani's lack of education has not stood in her way.

### **The Chief Minister's Advisor**

We held a meeting at Biswanathpur village in Kalahandi. Around five hundred women— fifty or sixty from Kashipur village itself— from eleven districts assembled there to take part in a state-level meeting. I had gone to attend this meeting leaving my child at home. We discussed how we could become self-reliant. Although we are entitled to rights, in reality, we do not enjoy them. What should be done so that we could exercise our rights? We have a right to know everything. We exchanged such views at the meeting.

Biju Patnaik was then the Chief Minister of Odisha. We had invited him to address our meeting. He had come to Rayagada, but he could not make it to Kalahandi that day. The tehsildar of Kalahandi came and told us that the Chief Minister did want to come and meet us, but he was unable to do so. He would meet us some other time. This was how he explained the matter to us. We believed him. At the bus stand in Rayagada, people held a demonstration demanding a ban on liquor shops before the Chief Minister.

We sell gold, we sell land in order to consume liquor. Even we sell off our cattle. Husbands beat their wives when they get drunk. Fathers beat their sons, sons beat their fathers. All the money in a household is spent on liquor. At that time, the wage a daily labourer was entitled to get was twenty-five rupees a day as per government rule. However, women labourers were paid only ten rupees and men, fifteen rupees. What about our full wages? This was a matter of concern.

Then, the issue of uncultivated land had to be addressed. The highlands the plateau belonged to others; the low lands belonged

to us, tribals. You say that water, land and forest belong to tribals, then how come you encroach upon the forests, which belong to them? Forests are national property; we don't have licence, fine, why then does the government exploit the benefits? We have rights over them; why would not we get them on lease? The papers of the land are registered in the name of men. Why are not these registered in the name of women? Lured by money, men give their land away. If these are registered in our names, no one can throw us out of our land. Why does a daughter not enjoy any rights over her father's property? Sons inherit everything. We wrote down ten such points and sent a memorandum to the Chief Minister.

When the Chief Minister called us, we went to meet him. Our group comprised eight men and twenty women—twenty-eight tribals in all. At Bhubaneswar, we spent three days preparing ourselves for the meeting with the Chief Minister. We decided who among us would present which issue before the Chief Minister. One of us would demand proper wages for daily labourers; another would ask him to impose a ban on the sale of liquor in our region. In this manner, we prepared ourselves to meet the Chief Minister. No one believed that the Chief Minister would pay any heed to these tribal women! He would ignore us—this was what we were told by the officers at Bhubaneswar. What would we do—he might accept our demands or he might not, but we had made up our mind to meet him. We had been granted gate-passes. We went to meet him.

His security man said—Mother, the Chief Minister will come at ten. He advised us that one who could speak confidently before the Chief Minister should lead the group. One of us suggested that one who had come from Kalahandi should come forward; another said Sumani should do the talking. I said, Why should we push each other; our aim is to have a few words with the Chief Minister.

Mingiri's wife shook nervously when she came face to face with the old man (Biju babu). I stood up to speak on behalf of our group. He asked me where I was from. I said, I was from Kashipur



block, Rayagada district, Siriguda village, and my name, Sumani Jhodia. We had organised a meeting at Biswanathpur and had invited you. As you didn't come, we presented you a memorandum stating ten demands. We've come here to find out whether our demands would be fulfilled or not.

To this, he said, O, granddaughter, you're my granddaughter. Thus saying, he patted on our backs and took us along with him. Everybody had thought that the Chief Minister would not spare five minutes for us, but we spent almost five hours with him. We told him all our problems—someone spoke to him about the mines, another one of the need to ban liquor sale and yet another voiced the demand for equal wages. When someone forgot to mention some of the points, I filled the gaps and coherently presented all the issues before him. Andari Majhi, Sabai Majhi spoke at length on the prevalence of liquor. They said, Sir, our gold jewellery is sold off and the money is spent on liquor, our land is lost for liquor, quarrels and violence take place for liquor. If you grant licence to people to set up liquor shops or to sell mahula—We the twenty, twenty-five women assembled here would not budge an inch from here. We'll wash your utensils. Why do you grant mahula licence? In this manner, we told the old man of our problems.

He said, Listen Mothers, I grant licence for sale of cattle food, they distil liquor instead. We said, Sir, is your head at its right place? Are these cattle food? Have you ever heard of people buying mahula to feed cattle? We said many things in this vein. He said, Five hundred people died drinking poisonous liquor. I couldn't do anything. Like you cook finger millet gruel at your backyard, you prepare liquor. If women's groups and youth clubs in your region come together, liquor can't be brewed there. I can't stop sale of liquor. We said, If you can't stop liquor consumption, why are you the Chief Minister of Odisha? Whatever may happen, we'll launch a campaign against liquor sale. You give us your permission. We'll start a campaign against liquor. Apart from this, we told him of our grievances regarding wages, land, mining, licence etcetera.

The old man said that he would select three from us and appoint them as his advisors. We said, We've come from so many districts, three advisors can't speak for all the districts. We wrote to the Chief Minister asking him to appoint eight advisors as we suggested names of women from Dhenkanal, Sundargarh, Sambalpur, Kalahandi, Phulbani, and Rayagada. He appointed them as advisors. He appointed me as the head among the advisors saying, I accepted what you say. Now, you've to listen to what I say.

After six months, he called the district collectors from thirty districts of Odisha. He also called the Director General of Police. In the same way, he called several collectors, police officials and held a meeting at the state secretariat. We eight women went and sat on chairs placed in the meeting hall. Collectors came and said, The Chief Minister will come, you women, why are you sitting here? Go and sit in the back rows. How dare you sit here? We got scared and hurried to occupy the back rows.

The Chief Minister came in. He looked around and said, Why are my advisors sitting in the back rows! Bring them to the front. The Collectors looked baffled. They had told us to vacate the front seats! Now, they said, Mothers, come to the front. After we took our seats, the Chief Minister said, I've a lot to say. These eight women are my advisors. If District Collectors don't listen to them, they'll be dismissed. I've called this meeting to introduce them to all of you. The police should support them in every possible way. I'll grant them the powers enjoyed by a Superintendent of Police.

Then, I said, Why will you give us the powers of a Superintendent of Police? As you're the Chief Minister, we came to you. We told you of our difficulties, you made us your advisors. Don't you remember? Now, you will grant us police powers. We're women, we'll go to destroy liquor pots. One doesn't cook in a single house. All kinds of tribes cook liquor. If they assault us at some stream or under a tree, can you keep them from doing this? Can you remove such people from our houses? We'll never agree with you. Why is there a police force, a DG in Odisha? Why is there

a police station in every block? Why is there a Collector in every district? Why would not they start a movement against liquor? Why should we start a movement? We don't want anything from you. We won't go to start a movement against brewing and selling liquor. We refused his proposal again and again.

No, no, I won't listen to any of your excuses; you'll be given a uniform and a torch. These will help you in breaking liquor pots. The sarapanch, the district collector will help you, the police will help you, and everybody will help you.

We said, Let the police go and break the liquor pots. He didn't pay heed to our words. He gave orders to the police. I said, You grant us such authority. Won't you listen to us? You visit Kashipur, won't you open a hospital there? You've invited me and done so many things—you don't ever listen to me? I listen to you. Build a hospital.

He said, Yes. I'll give you a vehicle.

What will I do with it? I walk bare-foot, I'm a tribal woman. We climb hills, we swim in rivers, what do I do with a vehicle? There are twenty panchayats in Kashipur. The distance from one panchayat to another panchayat must be between twenty to forty kilometres. Donate a vehicle to the hospital. The patients can be carried to the hospital. What's the point in providing me with a vehicle?

He said, No, I'll give the vehicle to you.

I said, No, no, you give it to the hospital.

He provided a vehicle to the hospital. He said that I had donated it.

We ran several campaigns against the brewing and sale of liquor. We mobilised women from villages and held meetings. At many places, cooking liquor could be stopped, but in Dongasili, the practice continued. We planned to smash the liquor pots there. When we reached that village, they asked us, Mothers, why have

you come here? We said that we had come to buy turmeric, and so saying, we held a meeting in the shade of a tree. We first approached the chieftain of the village. We said, Please help us. We've come here to smash the pots of liquor and hearths on which it is cooked. We would break all the liquor pots. He said, Mother, if you find even one glass of liquor, I lose my face. There's no liquor at all in my area. Why am I here?

We said, There may be liquor or there may not be, but you're trying to act smart. So, he said, Are you a man? We're human beings, I'm Sumani Jhodia. We're so many women present here, why, do their heads look small, and you found in me a man-like head? I said to Gumati, Bring our uniforms. Let's put on our uniforms. She rose to her feet and wore her uniform. No, Mother, you won't find liquor anywhere. He said this and sent people on bicycles as messengers to hide liquor or close the places where liquor was brewed. We entered a house. We saw a bicycle. Why does this chieftain send a messenger on a bicycle? To hide the brewed liquor for certain.

We hit upon an idea. We're entering a house, we're told—That's the prayer room, don't go inside. There you won't find liquor. We agreed. We said, All right.

A constable came out of that room. He asked, Have you come to ask for work? Do you want some corn, or finger millet or rice grains?

You would lose your job. We haven't come without permission; we've come here with orders from the Chief Minister. Had we come here before? You're trying to make money, but now you would lose your job.

Who are you to tell me all this? He asked us.

We went in to smash liquor pots. When the cyclist went from village to village, riding his cycle, we followed him. When we reached a place where there were liquor pots, they covered them with cowhides. The hides hadn't been tanned; so they gave off a foul smell. We didn't go near them. In one house, toddy pots were

kept in a barrel so big you could store ten, fifteen *manas* of grains in it. They had covered it with a lid and coloured paper. How could the smell of liquor still come out of it? We wandered about the place. Someone by chance pressed a barrel, it was now open. When we saw the toddy pots, we shattered them with sticks. We brought stones, tied them to the staves and broke the huge pots with them. We broke all the pots. In Gobinda settlement, they had hidden away everything. Gumati found these out. Pots of liquor were kept on the road. Gumati and twenty other women took out a procession. “Dongasili village won, Kashipur women’s association lost.” People gave slogans like this. We walked on, carrying the pots on our head.

We went to Mandibisi to carry out the work of our organisation. Around twenty or twenty-five women of Mandibisi village and eight or ten women of our area held a meeting. On our way back, we came across a drunkard. We hid ourselves upon seeing him. When the drunkard went away, we resumed our journey. That drunkard had hid himself in a shop in Mandibisi. We bought puffed rice and walked along the road when Narayana Bahmuna walked up to us and said, Sister, the youth club and the women’s association of Mandibisi together broke the pots. I said, Brother, we came once, we can’t come every day. If you can do it in your village, that’s good. You’re there. What more our organisation would do? So he said, Sister, two groups are better than one. On our way, a drunkard called Minju Majhi of Pipalpadar village tried to attack us, saying, The damned Collector has given you orders, the damned Chief Minister has given you orders to break liquor pots; today I’ll beat all of you, I’m drunk, I’m out of my senses. I said, Listen brother, drink your fill, lose your senses, no one stops you; we haven’t uttered a word to you. Why are you quarrelling with us? We tried to explain things to him in various ways, but he would not listen to us. He came forward to beat us. I’ll kill you today; surely I’ll take your lives today. Let’s see how you would kill us, saying this we landed a blow on his stomach. He vomited liquor. We went away. He rose and asked for a handful of rice, and with an axe sprung up to kill me.

We were women, we got scared lest he might kill us. We hid ourselves. Then people from his village came and led him away. They dragged him away, but there was no guarantee that he might not attack us again. So we went to the police station in Kashipur and filed a case against him. The police kept him in custody for four, five days. Once, I tried to explain to him, Brother, I filed the case against you. What happened? You were found guilty. But he didn't admit his fault. He went to jail. Kanhu Majhi of Mandibisi got him out on bail. Again, he didn't turn up on the date of hearing at the court; so another warrant was issued against his name.

We had to go to the Rayagada court. There, the witnesses were Gunjali Naika of Mandibisi, Kandan of Siriguda, Gumati of Kalakani. Is Sumani guilty? No, Everyone said, Minju Majhi was guilty. He was granted a bail after a lot of difficulty. Afterwards, he died all of a sudden.

I recall another incident of picketing in Charijodi village. One tribal man said, Who made you what you are today, who made you a leader? He got drunk and created a lot of nuisance. He opposed us vehemently. We didn't pay any attention to him and continued our work. We went from village to village to strengthen our organisational work. When we do good work, people take it otherwise and create nuisance. We never feel scared—why should we be afraid? We have formed an organisation; we can't accomplish anything if we're afraid. Whenever a conflict arises, our organisation deals with it. It decides what course of action is reasonable. Once a decision is taken, we don't go against it. If a complaint is made against the organisation, a response is given. We have been benefited by this organisation.

Most of the toddy shops were closed down. In our village, there were no toddy shops; there is no toddy shop now. When a child is born or there is a wedding or a festival, we bring one or two pots of liquor from another village to make do with it.

My son is going to college. When our children are educated, perhaps, the practice of brewing liquor would come to an end.

Earlier, young men would go to village dormitories and get drunk. This no longer happens. Young girls, too, went to sleep in dormitories, but they didn't go to another village to spend the night singing and dancing. These days, boys go to schools and colleges. The practice of spending nights at dormitories, dancing and singing among young men and women has grown less frequent with the passage of time.

### **Profit from Ama Sangathan**

Why did we build Ama Sangathan? We were backward. We had to face many hardships while building our organisation. Agrabamee trained us, made us aware of realities; it gave a walking stick to those who were mentally blind and lame. After this, we built our organisation and went from village to village and asked the womenfolk— Why are we so backward, why can't we stand on our own feet, why can't we fight to get what is our birthright. We've everything, but we're being exploited by other agencies, we don't know what is good for us, we can't know. Our sarapanch never comes to visit our panchayat. So, we decided we'll build our own organisation. We're facing many difficulties. Why do we suffer so much hardship?

We went from village to village. In one village, there was a women's association, in another, a fund had been set up. We started a women's association in our village, Siriguda. We held discussions with womenfolk in other villages and formed women's associations at Chandragiri, Dhangasir, Sunger, Kerpai, Mandibinsi, Dhobasil, Sankarada, Tikri, Bandaimajhi, Sakaimajhi, Ujardeimajhi, Galmadi, Muktajaria, Lakshmijaria, Parajaria, Khuntari. One association would look after one village. As they could not look after a block, we thought of building an organisation. Mothers saved money with great difficulty. Who would support our organisation? The villagers of Mandibisi village had formed the first women's association. We organised a broomstick movement with its help. Based on its success, we went on to build our organisation. We named it, Ama Sangathan.

We set to work. We wrote to the government to give us work. As we said that we wanted to undergo training, government organised a training programme to teach us how to weave carpets. Forty women underwent training; they received five hundred rupees every month as stipend. They took three hundred rupees out of this and saved two hundred. The savings amounted to fourteen thousand four hundred fifty rupees. We chose an area which was covered with forest. It was full of broomstick grass. Tribal Development Credit Corporation (TDCC) procured broomsticks, which were made here. However, TDCC did not directly buy these; it collected these from middlemen and touts. The government had fixed the price at two rupees, but in villages, it was sold at one rupee and fifty paise. While weighing these on the scales, we would see that these weighed ten kilograms, but they would say these weighed seven or eight kilograms. We were ignorant. We would agree with whatever they said.

As Mandibisi women's association had fourteen thousand and four hundred rupees at its disposal, we said we would sell broomsticks. This is our forest. We would make broomsticks and sell these. No, no, you can't do it on your own. You must inform the District Collector. So we went to meet the District Collector. We said, Sir, we buy broomsticks from our own funds, TDCC should not buy these anymore. The Collector said, Mothers, please buy what you want, I'll help you, I'll give you one lakh rupees. You buy broomsticks and supply these to TDCC. You've to give interest at the rate of two rupees.

No, sir, we can't afford to give two rupees as interest. We'll collect these ourselves; we'll buy these and produce these. We'll sell what we produce. He said, No, Mothers, I'm sorry, I can't give you permission. We said, We'll buy the raw material. He said, Go and do so.

We bought the raw material. We bought broomstick grass worth fourteen thousand and eight hundred fifty rupees. After this, some women's associations donated seven thousand rupees. Another women's association donated ten thousand rupees. In this



manner, we raised money. We bought broomstick grass with this money. After collecting broomstick grass, we enquired if anyone had undergone training in making soft broomsticks. Two women in a village near Kashipur had undergone training at the TDCC. With their help, we organised a training camp. TDCC officials said, Let's see how these mothers make broomsticks. One came riding a motor-bike to see how we worked. He went back and reported the matter to TDCC, the tehsildar and the police. A Muslim tehsildar of Kashipur broke into the storeroom of Mandibisi women's association's office, beat the womenfolk and forcibly took broomsticks worth seventy-five thousand rupees to the TDCC office and filed a case against us alleging that we had beaten him. We went and filed a case against him alleging that he had forcibly taken away our broomsticks. We had to fight a long drawn-out battle. Behera was the Revenue Divisional Commissioner at the time. He came to Kashipur. He called us to Rayagada. He made us face difficulties.

I had been to Bilaspur. Mandibisi Women's Association organised a meeting at Kashipur. The Collector, the Revenue Divisional Commissioner, the Divisional Forest Officer were all present there. The Minister came and said, If there was a single women's association in a village, it won't get lease. If all the villages of Kashipur block form a women's association, it will be given the lease. We agreed to this proposal. Twelve women's associations had been registered so far. We registered a few more and covered every village in Kashipur and applied for permission to form an organisation.

We convened meetings. Who would be the president, who would be the secretary, who would be the accountant? After several meetings, a resolution was passed. I became the president. I had declined the offer many times, saying, I cannot be the president, I cannot go from village to village, I can't work any longer. No, No, you have to be the president. We don't know who the officials are, the officials listen to you, and you are the only one who can be the president.

I became the president. Sukuru Majhi of Mandibisi became the vice-president. Ujaldei Majhi became the secretary. Now, she has become the chairperson and Sushila Majhi is the secretary. Mukta Jhodia acts as the accountant. Andhari is the assistant secretary. There are seven members in the governing body and thirty members in the general body. The seven members' met once in three months, the thirty members met once in six months. Once in a year, the general body meeting took place, in which everything was discussed—the accounts, sale and purchase. We wrote to the Collector to organise such a meeting. When we wrote to get our organisation registered, we got a lease certificate. There were one hundred and fifty women in our organisation. Gradually, the number increased to one thousand. One can become a member by paying eleven rupees a year.

When we started our organisation, our activities were confined to making broomsticks. In course of time, we started doing many other things. We would go and ask the BDO of our block if there was no teacher in any school. We would check how much oil, pulses, wheat the children were given under the Integrated Child Development Scheme. Similarly, we monitored the vaccination programme in villages. People did not believe in vaccines. When we had fever or whenever we fell ill, we would take roots or herbs. We were superstitious. Our organisation now monitored what illnesses the children suffered from. They would go from village to village to persuade their mothers to get them vaccinated. They would ask the nurses about the date of vaccination and why they did not visit a village on that date and request them to visit the villages. All such activities were and are still carried out by our organisation.

Our organisation now grows pulses, turmeric and mustard. We sold eighty-seven quintals of pulses to ICDS. We went to the Department of Social Welfare office and brought an order from the Collector to receive pulses at Kashipur block. The head office of the Integrated Child Development Scheme is in Bhubaneswar. When we inform the Chief administrative officer there, he issues an order, which helps us.

Our organisation has another achievement. A man harassed Andhari Majhi of Tikri panchayat every day in a state of drunkenness. He would beat her. One day, he rubbed chilly power into her eyes. A quarrel broke out. Andhari-ma went and filed a case against him at the Tikri Police Station. The police didn't listen to her nor did it take any action against the culprit. She wrote a letter to our organisation saying, I'm being harassed like this, please help me.

Four thousand women gathered at Siriguda village. We carried ground finger millet to feed ourselves. We marched to Tikri Police Station in a procession. The police station shook in our presence. Who is right? Who is wrong? Why should women start an agitation? We said, See, if you don't take any action against that man, if you don't send him to jail, we would demolish the police station, said we, the women. The men were too scared to say anything to Andhari-ma. Our organisation helped women who were victims of domestic violence. We worked to ease difficult situations and demanded justice.

**(Muin Sumani kahuche, pp. 44-58)**



## **WRITERS**

**Aparna Devi**

**Sitadevi Khadanga**

**Pitambari Devi**

**Gita Hota**

**Pratibha Ray**

**Pratibha Satpathy**

## Aparna Devi (1898-1963)

Aparna Devi was born into a Brahmin family in Balabhadrapur, Puri. She lost her father, Baidanath Dikshit at the age of five. She got married before she was seven to a young Brahmin boy of seventeen, who only had a dilapidated house on a small piece of land and a widowed mother. Aparna was sent to her in-law's house when she was fourteen. By that time, her husband had started teaching at a primary school in Puri. They lived in a rented house in Puri. After eight years of marriage, Aparna gave birth to a daughter, who tragically died after five days of her birth. Later, she had two sons and a daughter.

Aparna Devi attended a lower primary school in her village in the face of stiff opposition from her family members. However, she continued to go to school as she was encouraged by her teacher at the school. While growing up at her parental house, Aparna never missed a chance to read pothis and scriptures at home and to listen to the recitation of scriptures. She developed a passion for reading any book that came her way at an early age. She also learnt Bangla with the help of a primer and read a lot of Bengali books. Impressed by the story of the Bangla novel *Rajalakshmi*, she translated it into Odia, but the manuscript lay unpublished and got devoured by termites in due course. She went on to write several long poems in which the emphasis was laid on the evocation of feelings through strong and noble women characters. The second edition of *Indumati*, her first narrative poetry book, was published by Cuttack Publishing House in 1930 and went on to have sixth edition by 1986.

Her autobiographical fragment was first published in *Jhankar* in 1963. It was reprinted in the Odia monthly *Sucharita* in June 1977. Here she tells about her childhood, her indomitable will to read and the unpleasant situations she had to face on account of it. She also tells about her in-laws' place and briefly describes her family life. In this short excerpt, she gives an account of the ordeals she had to face to get her books published. The fragment shows not only her passionate love for reading, but also her desire to express herself through poems.

### **My Search for Truth**

My husband, apart from doing his regular job, gave private tuition in the morning and evening. We somehow managed to make ends meet. I had no chores to do at home in the afternoon. Whenever I got hold of a book, I would go through it. Once I read a Bangla novel titled *Rajalakshmi*. I liked it so much that I translated it into Odia on sheets of coarse-grained paper. At that time, my youngest son was only four. I made a fair-copy of the translation on a few quires of paper, but where from the money required for printing the book would come? The manuscript lay abandoned; white ants devoured it in course of time.

My elder sister lived in Birapratappur. Her eldest son, Gopinath (He is the nephew of Lakshman Mishra, Superintendent of Police) passed from Bhargabi Middle English School (now it has been upgraded to a high school) and stayed at my house to study at Puri Zilla School. After passing the matriculation examination, he joined the Puri Collectorate as a clerk. He stayed at my house for seven, eight years. He was writing a play, *Raghu*, at that time.

Long back, I had read a torn copy of *Sudhanyasanbara*, a short play in Bangla. I had borrowed the book from someone. In this play, the heroine, Indumati's disinterested love had left a deep impression on my mind. I told Gopi of this and requested him to write a play modelled on it. Whenever I reminded him about it, he would say that he would start writing it after he completed writing *Raghu*. Finally, he completed writing *Raghu* and gave the rough draft

to me to make a fair copy in long hand. I copied the manuscript, and, at places, edited a few passages wherever I felt changes were necessary.

Gopi liked the changes I had made. He said, “You’ve such writing skills! Why don’t you write *Indumati*? Why do you press me to do the job?”

“I’m a woman, after all! What can I write?” I said reluctantly.

He was insistent.

“I’ll follow you once you start.” I promised him.

Gopi started writing; so did I. I began with, “*Sabasa shrabane pasante ramani karuna katara swana*” (suddenly he heard the wailing of a woman) and went on to write five cantos in a similar manner. When Gopi saw my flair at writing, he did not write further. I did not press him either. After seven, eight cantos got written, he finished writing the portion allotted to him. The manuscript was handed to Narayan Tripathy, who was the headmaster of Korai Middle English School. He went through it and remarked that the first ten, twelve couplets were inferior to the rest of the poem. He suggested deleting those portions. He did not know that these had been written by Gopi. Those lines were omitted.

*Indumati* was sent to many publishers, who opined that it had no literary merit. At last, the queen of Keonjhar agreed to publish the book. To Mr. Madhusudan Pattnaik, the Manager, belongs the credit of bringing the book out. As advised by Narayan Tripathy, I had sent the manuscript of *Indumati* to the queen dedicating the book to her. When I received her assurance that she would get it published, my enthusiasm grew manifold. I sent my other manuscripts to Narasinghpur and other places and also succeeded in getting them published. After its publication, *Indumati* was criticised severely. As a result, I stopped writing for a while. Then I thought to myself that if I gave up my search for truth fearing criticism, my action would only fuel further criticism. If I remained stuck to truth, it would surely be accepted one day. I reassured myself and

set to work on *Chinta*, *Kabitanjali*, *Arjyalalana* and other books.

Narayan babu belonged to Cuttack; Madhu babu lived in Keonjhar. I was a woman who lived in purdah in Puri. Receiving their help was something of a miracle. If I wrote how immensely I was benefited by them, I would have to tell a long story. Here let me just give a list of my books and their publishers.

*Indumati* was published by the Queen of Keonjhar. *Chinta* and *Arjya Lalana* were published by the Queen of Narasinghpur. *Dasa kumara Charita* and *Dasa kumari Charita* were published by the King and Queen of Athamalik. Mrs Surjyamani Devi, wife of Raysaheb Anandachandra Pati published *Kabitanjalai*. *Satadala* was published by Choudhury Gangadhara Dash, the landlord of Bhingarpur, and *Banamalati* by the Princess of Jharia. *Debirani* was brought out by the Publishing House, Cuttack, whereas *Baramasi* got published by the Utkal Sahitya Press, Cuttack.

Apart from these, I wrote numerous epics, poems and short stories, which lay unpublished. The author's name must appear on the cover of her books. I did not like using my birth name, "Apsara." I chose "Aparna" as my pen-name, the name by which my revered first teacher called me affectionately.

This is a brief account of my life. I have now run into trouble because of my writing. After the publication of *Indumati*, the king and queen of Keonjhar had helped me in various ways. Eighteen, nineteen years ago, the king had got a house built for me in Puri to spare me the trouble of shifting from one house to another, like owners of makeshift shops. The state government has recently filed a law-suit against me and wants me to vacate this house. I have to appear before the court to defend my case. It is like banging one's head against a stone wall.

("Narikabi Aparna Devi", *Jhankar*, Issue II, 1963, pp. 1011-1019. This piece of writing was part of a long recollection curated by Debi Prasanna Pattanayak, a linguist and former director of CIIL, Mysore)





## Sitadevi Khadanga (1904-1983)

Sitadevi Khadanga was born into a rich Brahmin family in 1904, in a village in Ganjam. Her father, Harihara Panda was an advocate in Aska and an Odia nationalist leader. Her uncle, Sribatsa Panda was a social reformer, who fervently advocated against child marriage and championed girls' education. Her father had established a school in Aska, but he never sent Sitadevi to school. Even as a child, she noticed the contrasting personality between her father and uncle. She learnt to read from the home tutor who came to their home to teach her brother. Sitadevi married Banchhanidhi Khadanga, who was a school teacher, when she was around ten years old.

Sitadevi Khadanga's reputation rests on the plays she wrote; her famous plays include *Sabodar*, *Naree*, *Poshya putra*, *Naisthika*, *Nishapati*, *Prachinapanthi*, *Kshudara pida* and *Matrubhina*. These plays are concerned with burning social issues of her time.

Her autobiography, *Mora jeevan smruti* (My Reminiscences) was finished in 1976 and was published in 1978. Hers is the first example of autobiography in Odia written by a woman. Though she is apprehensive about her ability to weave a coherent narrative out of her life, she succeeds in providing a gripping account of her life and times. Her autobiography can be read as an illuminating commentary on orthodox practices and the constraints which blighted women's lives in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In the excerpts selected here she shares how she felt deeply hurt by the treatment meted out to her poor cousin by her affluent father. She also tells her readers how love for literature sustained

her through sorrows and sickness. The trials and tribulation she endured as a playwright and as the owner of a theatre company is described in detail, too. In all this, she comes out as a detached yet compassionate observer of life.

### **Clods of Earth**

I pay homage to my guru and set out to write down some incidents from my life. I have not done noble deeds which are worth recording, but I am constantly spurred on by a strong desire as I lie on my sick-bed. Human beings always crave name and fame. A similar craving motivates me to pick up the pen and set down my memories. I find myself helpless before this desire. So I sit down to write a few chapters of my insignificant life.

I cannot say how happy my childhood was. I still recall many incidents of those days. My experiences do not provide me with any material for writing an account of my life. My life would have lost itself in anonymity and listlessness; but I recall an incident which changed my outlook: The seed of a peepul tree came floating in the wind and fell into a crevice in my roof and grew into a tree. The old roof leaks at a hundred places, but the tree has been growing slowly and steadily. He, who has created it, alone knows how it gathers sap from the roof. Who knows how the creator sowed a handful of seeds of knowledge in the desert of my heart? The sight of the peepul tree on the roof amazed me and stirred my imagination and led it to construct one sentence after another.

When one sits down to write about oneself, several other people naturally find their way into the story. Those who are extremely careful can distance themselves from others and write only about themselves. They thus display strength of will, courage and restraint. But is writing one's life-story an expression of one's will power and courage in words? I am going to write about myself only to record my deeds. What significant deeds have I done? Modern writers of autobiographies express themselves so skillfully that they enable readers to imagine so many things when they go through their narratives. I feel tempted to see the bud of my

creativity bloom, but how would it be possible? Our forefathers have breathed *mantras* into the ears of their sons, which bid them to achieve success in their creative endeavours. However, our mothers and aunts have trained us, women, only to cook. Our time—from leaving the bed in the morning till going to bed at night—is spent entirely in cooking, making pickles, giving a coat of cow dung to the walls and verandas and the cowsheds. Of course, this was how the world used to be when I was a child.

Women of the present age, after completing their education at schools and colleges, have been able to earn money; however, they have not succeeded in achieving the same status enjoyed by men. It cannot be said that no one has done so. However, their number is very small. Someone somewhere, I am sure, must have succeeded.

My childhood and even my youth belong to the period before India attained independence. My father, Harihara Panda, was born in village Mandar near Bhanjanagar in 1866. My grandfather's name was Braja Sundar Panda. They were six brothers and cousins, all of whom lived in a joint family. They were very prosperous. My father was the first advocate in Ganjam district. He had earned a reputation in his profession. Mandar was located in Ghumsur taluk in Ganjam. In the last hundred years, no one from that village had received an English education and become an advocate or a magistrate. The Almighty alone knows how the idea of becoming one occurred to my father. I don't know how much education he had received at the village school. I know that, at the age of eighteen, he had left Mandar and spent a few years in Aska to pursue higher studies.

My father's elder sister, Heera, lived in village Nalabanta near Aska; probably she lived there with her husband and in-laws. Mandar lay near Bhanjanagar; Nalabanta was close to Aska. Those were strange times. I remember my Heera aunt. Her husband died when he was only thirty-two. She looked beautiful even in her widowhood. She must have been a very beautiful woman when she was young. Her husband was poor; he made a living buying and

selling rice. He would buy two cart-loads of rice from Aska and sell these in Berhampur and make a profit of five to seven rupees per cart-load of rice. Cholera used to kill lots of people those days. Heera aunt's husband would start with his cart from Nalabanta in the evening. He would be expected to arrive at Berhampur in the evening the next day. He would fetch water from a pond and cook his meal under a tree by the roadside. He would also feed the bullocks. He went down with cholera during one such trip. The cart drivers brought home his dead body in his cart. The story of his life came to an end in this way.

Heera aunt had two sons. Both of them were very handsome. The younger son, Batsa died of cholera when I was five or six. The elder son, Akul was tall, fair, lean and with a longish face and broad forehead. His teeth resembled the seeds of a pomegranate and his eyes were black like beetles. My aunt used to say, "Your uncle was even more handsome than Akul."

The Panda family of Mandar was famous in the locality for their prosperity. They would feed thousands of Brahmins on death anniversaries, thread and marriage ceremonies. I heard from Heera aunt that my grandfather and great grandfather would spend money ungrudgingly to acquire fame. Of my grandfather's six brothers and cousins, I remember Dharma Panda and Basudev Panda. The names of the others I cannot recall now. The three brothers of the previous generation had two children each. I have also heard that my grandfather was a courtier at the court of the Bhanja king. Law-suits kept his brother, Basudev Panda, always occupied. He would lend money and grain to poor farmers and labourers at a high rate of interest when they were hard up, and later, grab their land with the help of a lawyer.

Basudev Panda was impressed by the clout of lawyers in Aska and Berhampur and planned to train someone in the family as a lawyer in order to increase the wealth, fame and influence of his family. With this in mind, he had sent my father to receive an English education. I started to write about my life and felt the

necessity of writing about my father. How could I know about my father? To be able to write about him, I turn to Heera aunt.

Heera aunt assumed so many forms when she narrated the story of our family, now smiling and then shedding tears. Even today my heart is agitated by the memory of incidents, which had taken place sixty years ago. Heera aunt pervades my body and mind taking a million shapes. After so many years I am going to bring her back from the world of the dead. The daughter of such a rich father! But the wealthy father never gave even a *bharan* of rice or hundred rupees to his daughter. Her in-laws family consisted of her husband's elder brother and his wife. They too made a living buying and selling rice, green gram and black gram. Heera aunt would spend six months with them and a year or two at her parents' house in Mandar.

While talking about herself, Heera aunt also narrated the lives of her ancestors. My grandfather's father had a number of daughters, about six. Their parents had married them all into poor families. Their husbands came to their father-in-law's house to work as cooks and help him in farming. The old man would go to other villages to supervise the farming of his land and his sons-in law would do the cooking for him. The father-in law would measure out the rice before giving it to one son-in-law to cook. He would count the pieces of fish. While taking food, he would say, "Rath, there must be four more pieces of fish. Bring me two more." Feeling terribly hurt, the son-in-law would stomp to the kitchen, bring the curry and empty the container onto his father-in-law's plate.

Heera aunt narrated all this to me. I would listen to her, sitting close to her by the hearth in winter evenings. My mother would sometimes interrupt us, saying: "If you sit by the hearth, talking, what will the cook do?" My mother's anger made me leave Heera aunt and go to bed. My aunt would ask the cook guiltily, "Can I help you? Give me the vegetables. Let me chop them."

The fourteen or fifteen year old cook would say jokingly, "There's nothing left to chop now. I've already prepared a curry for the master

with two eggplants and a potato. Mother had given a handful of pulses to cook. Don't know who will get how much to eat."

Sitting at the fireplace, I would listen to their conversation. I felt sorry for Heera aunt. If one was poor, one had to endure so much humiliation. Parents of girls would start giving them advice when they were hardly three. They wished to get rid of them by giving them away in marriage as early as possible. The groom would arrive borne in a palanquin; drums would be beaten and pipes would be played at the ceremony. The bride would go to her in-laws' house. She would take only a couple of clothes from her parents' house. She would also take with her a few pieces of turmeric and a few pots of sweets. She would go riding a bullock cart, accompanied by a cousin.

When I saw Heera aunt, she was already sixty and was still very beautiful. I could only imagine how beautiful she must have been when she was fourteen or fifteen. Why do I describe this aunt in such great detail? The reason is—the beginning of this story consists of what I have heard from her. The story of my father's family described here is a narrative I gathered from her.

First, I should write about my father's early life. I am afraid I may deviate from it in the course of my narration. My eldest aunt was about ten years older than my father. I did not know her exact age. The birth of Heera aunt was followed by that of a son, my uncle, and four daughters. This eldest aunt was not only very beautiful; she was soft-spoken and affectionate as well. If one looked at her face, one felt as if her eyes swam in tears. It appeared as though she was saying something in deep anguish.

I never heard my father speak to his elder sister, such a wonderful woman. She would do everything for a handful of rice and stay in her brother's house for a couple of months. Those days a seer of rice cost only four paisa. As far as I can remember, a seer of ghee cost a rupee, and oil, four anas. A bisa of eggplant sold for five to six paisa. Even if things were so cheap, how reluctant these people were to feed one extra mouth! So many things were brought

over from Mandar village— rice, green gram, horse gram, black gram, mustard and mangoes – but a daughter had no right at all over her parental property.

Heera aunt's son, Akul would carry a bag of rice, walk by the cremation ground on the other side of river Rushikulya. When the time of his arrival drew closer, my aunt would take me to the steps near the river and fix her gaze on the road. I remember how eagerly she told me, “Look, Vaidehi,” (another name for Sita, she would not utter my name since it was also her mother-in-law's name), “my little one is coming!” Akul was about thirty then. He was so handsome that his lovely face and his tall lean figure walking across the riverbed have remained indelibly etched in my mind. In the light of the setting sun in winter, he looked like an image made of gold.

Carrying a bag of rice on his head, he would pass through Aska bazaar and enter our house through the front door. My mother talked shop to her nephew. But when it was time for meals, all kinds of difficulties arose. Heera aunt would go to the kitchen and plead with the cook—“Please start cooking parboiled rice and dal. My child has come. He'll have something to eat before he leaves.”

The door and a large window of our kitchen were on one side. A small room to the south served as the dining hall for the female guests. Utensils, vegetables and pickles etcetera were kept there; the room would have been given a coat of coloured earth. After all of us finished our meals and the room was cleaned, I would spread a mat and lie over a quilt. I remember I could not do without a pillow. Who would put a pillow under my head, I cannot say. When Heera aunt or other aunts came, they also stayed there. Now-a-days, Jersey and Haryana cows in rich families are far better off than women in those days. My four aunts were named Heera, Mukta, Ratna and Jema. When I was seven or eight, my youngest aunt, Jema also became a widow.

Heera aunt was in no way inferior to the great women in scriptures, who had strong moral character and who brought up their children single-handedly. If the parents of girls like my Heera

aunt had educated their daughters and had given them in marriage to suitable grooms, their lives would have been so different. They only gave them names such as Heera and Mukta, which meant diamond and pearl. But these women were treated as though they were no better than clods of earth.

### Managing a Theatre Troupe

Why does a human being aspire to be a poet? In the hope of becoming immortal? Can one plan it all happen? Actually, that is not the case. When one's being overflows with emotions, one restlessly searches for peace like a cobra that has lost the jewel from its hood. One forgets about one's ignorance and sets about writing. All writing gets done as though one's hands are dragged from one end of a sheet of paper to the other end by some magical power. No sense of loss or grievance oppresses one at this moment. This power is so irresistible that one overlooks the pain and anguish even when one is yanked over thorny bushes. One feels the pain only when one returns to one's senses.

Many poets and writers dwell in my heart. On sleepless nights, they come and sit by my side. I have never met many of them in life. I have only seen their photographs printed on the back cover of their books. I would memorise passages from a poem imagining the face of the poet. I would worship the feet of the poet placing him in my heart. My sleepless nights would become rather pleasant than painful.

I have forgotten to write about one thing. From 1942 to 1945, I was engaged in an impossible task. My son and daughter were staying in hostels during this period. I had not met Devraj Pathy yet. I began writing plays. *Sahodar* (The Sibling) drew inspiration from my own experiences. The play was based on my parents' life—the story of a woman's life among her children and husband in a middle-class family. This was followed by *Nari* (Woman). Mr. Harekrishna Mahtab praised it profusely after watching it performed on the stage. *Poshya putra* (The Adopted Son), *Naisthika* (The Austere Man), *Nispati* (Decision), *Prachinapanthi* (Orthodox



Men), *Kshudara pida* (Pangs of Hunger), *Matrubina* (The Motherless) followed this play.

When my plays were regularly enacted on stage, my enthusiasm grew so much that I could finish writing a play in one night. In the morning, I would go through it again and make minor corrections here and there. I never felt tired even when I remained awake all night. Whenever I think of such intense moments I experienced while writing those plays, joy flows through my heart like a quiet river in autumn.

If I started writing how difficult it was to stage plays on the part of a woman like me, who was timid like a mouse living in the corner of a house, it would fill a big book. Besides, I did not have enough money. At times, I felt scared that I might have to face poverty on account of this. Still I could not control my desire to direct and produce plays.

I wrote around six or seven social plays and got them staged in Aska by my own theatre troupe. I could not remain content with this and went on to stage them in Berhampur. I could feel that the audience in Berhampur did not appreciate them. I felt somehow dispirited, but when I came back home my husband encouraged me, and once again, I set to work with enthusiasm. After this, I went to Rasulkonda (renamed Bhanja Nagar), where my plays became immensely popular. As far as I remember, around six plays were staged there.

On the last day, I was felicitated by its intellectuals at a public meeting. The citation was written in a simple and heart-touching language; it was printed on a sheet of paper, which had been framed nicely. I felt overwhelmed while responding to the felicitation. After this I went to Sorada. My plays became quite popular there. The bus carrying us broke down on our way back from Bhanja Nagar. It was a cold winter night. The bus was full of the members of my troupe. My brother was also accompanying me. How my brother sat in great discomfort by my side! The incident has faded like a dream with time, leaving only a trace of memory.

Those who worked with me in the troupe realised the difficulties involved in my enterprise. But outsiders often gossiped that I was making a lot of money out of it; I always ignored their comments. Gradually, the financial condition of the troupe worsened, the actors suggested that I dismantle the troupe. I did not pay heed to their words and went on to visit Sorada. It was mostly inhabited by tradesmen. I was a daughter-in-law of Gopalpur sasan, which lay near Sorada. No one had ever seen even my shadow; I used to remain confined to home. They were shocked when they found me in this new role—writing plays and directing a group of actors. They found this quite strange. Some of them, who became our friends, would express their feeling of surprise to us. A few of them were lovers of literature; these magnanimous people assured me that they would provide support to my troupe.

We took a house on rent. I don't remember how much money we had to pay towards the rent. The headmaster of the local high school expressed a lot of admiration for my plays. The plays were performed with considerable success. *Nari*, *Nispati*, *Poshya putra* etc, six in all, were performed there. After all the expenditure was met, we made a profit of seven hundred rupees.

My husband said, "Donate the money to the local high school. It would be saved in a bank; the best student of the year would get its interest." I did not like the suggestion. The theatre troupe was surviving for two years in the face of great financial difficulties. I had thought I would buy clothes with that money and gift them to all the actors. But I could not express my wish to my husband. He donated the money to the school.

I don't even know how the money was given to whom. Once I had asked my nephew, my husband's elder brother's son, to enquire after this. He did not say anything. Among my two nephews, the eldest has become a sarapanch in village; he looks after the land and leads an easy life. Perhaps he wishes to enjoy more power through politics. Politics has now-a-days become a battle-field. One who has money and muscle power wins the battle.

My theatre troupe has been dismantled long since, but the memories of preparing ourselves for staging plays remain bright in my heart. If I had not donated the money to Sorada high school, the theatre troupe might have continued for another month without any difficulty. However, I could not go against my husband's wish. How much interest would accrue in a year from seven hundred rupees that it could be given to one or two top students in the form of a scholarship? I did not want to utter a word against my husband's decision. The money earned by the actors of my theatre troupe was kept in the scholarship fund of Sorada high school.

Gradually, it became difficult on my part to meet the expenses on travel, the rent for the stage etcetera. Before I went to Sorada, I had been to Rasulkonda, Bhanja Nagar with my troupe. A stage had been constructed by the Odia Club there. I can't remember if we had paid the rent. Some of the literature-lovers helped us genuinely while the plays were staged there. My eyes fill when I remember the experience of joy I had had that day. On the last day, the writers of Bhanja Nagar had felicitated me. I don't remember what I said in my response to the felicitation, but when that night's meeting comes to my mind, I feel as though I was sitting in a gathering held in heaven. I would remember the writers of Bhanja Nagar with tearful eyes and a humble heart.

That evening, Radha Mohan Das (my uncle's son) came with a huge plateful of various kinds of sweets and fed my actors. I had read *Purusottam Dev* written by Godavarish Mishra on his suggestion, and his love for plays had left a deep impact on me. I don't know how and where he is now. It is painful to live abroad, away from one's native place. Utkalmani Gopabandhu Das wrote, "A friendless life is like the earth without the sun, which no mortal can endure." The poet said this overcome by emotion, but, in reality, human beings endure unbearable suffering. Sorrows don't matter to those who can remain detached throughout life.

Literature stimulates my imagination. I would analyse the good and evil sides of fictional characters. I would also think of

my elders. I shed tears remembering my misdeeds in the past. The memory of humiliation I had received in childhood would fill my heart. There was a time when I gave myself whole-heartedly to building the Harihara Natya Mandira; afterwards, by god's will, the actors went their separate ways. A loving relationship existed among us. I can still hear their words softly buzzing in my ears. How enthusiastically I used to write plays! I would write till dawn in order to complete a play. The actors would read it and discuss it animatedly. They would offer me their feedback and tell me if any elaboration or omission was needed at some places. The next day, I would incorporate their suggestions into the play and complete rewriting it in two, three days. I felt unspeakably happy at my creation. I felt like rolling at the feet of the Almighty. While writing, my mind would be animated with all kinds of ideas. Now, when I remember those days, my mind no longer dances in excitement. I spontaneously fold my hands in profound sadness and raise them up towards the divine power.

My husband would encourage me. He would say—"Just because the troupe broke up, should you give up writing? The plays have laid the foundation of your career as a writer. You must keep writing."

His words encouraged me to pick up the pen once more. I would sit down to write, forgetful of everything. I would go from one part of a story to another. On some days, I would stare at the blank page before me, pen in hand. I could hear the words of the actors of my troupe. The picture of the rehearsal would float before my eyes. On some afternoons, Devraj would come to spend some time with me. He was a soft-spoken young man. Devraj must have been no older than twenty at that time. We would discuss our social life, literature, human relationships, and how all these affected us. Tears roll down my cheeks when I think of those days. I could talk shop with such a young boy. No such love and trust now exist among fellow human beings.

**(Mora jeevan smruti, pp. 7-13, pp. 82-87)**



## Pitambari Devi (1905-1989)

Pitambari Devi was born in 1905 in Nuagan, Biswanathpur. She was a child widow but lived with Gopal Chandra Praharaj, her brother-in-law, who was a famous man of letters and lawyer in Odisha. Hers is an unusual life in many ways—a story from riches to rags. When Gopal Chandra Praharaj was found dead in 1945, she was accused of having murdered him and was arrested. After she was acquitted, she spent her last days in dire poverty.

Apart from writing a novel titled, *Kantarababu*, she assisted Gopal Chandra Praharaj in compiling *Purnachandra Odia Bhashakosa*, the monumental seven-volume dictionary in Odia. Her fragmentary memoir, *Dukha kahibi na sukha kahibi* (Shall I Tell You of my Sorrows or of My Joys) was serialised in *Istahaar* in 1983. She writes about her life with her brother-in-law, Gopal Chandra Praharaj and portrays him as a learned man with a heart of gold. She also hints at a troubled relationship that existed between her elder sister and her brother-in-law. Above all, she offers a lot of information on the making of *Purnachandra Odia Bhashakosa*.

### Shall I Tell You of My Sorrows or of My Joys?

I never had the good fortune of seeing Guruji's parents; Bhika na, Guruji's closest friend, had seen them.

That day, Guruji, as he had informed us earlier, came from Cuttack to Lokanath's house in Puri. He attended a meeting at Puri Sanskrit College. He arrived at our house around five in the evening. The next day, he went to Santha and returned after two

days. He gave me four thousand rupees, which he had collected through selling jackfruits, mangoes, coconuts and other such things at Santha. He had a meal at our place. Later, he asked a friend of mine, “Mother and Pitambari, do they still mourn for him?” She said, “Yes, they do.”

He was highlighting some passages in a book. I sat nearby, preparing a paan for him. Guruji said, “I’ll take you and mother on a pilgrimage to char dham. That will surely help you come to terms with your loss. I’ll leave for Cuttack today; I’ll come again after four days and take both of you with me. Tell this to father and mother.”

I fell at his feet and begged for his blessings. Guruji touched my parents’ feet and left for Cuttack.

My father accompanied Guruji to the station.

My mother was a pious woman. She spent most of her time worshipping deities and performing religious rites. Going on a pilgrimage was more than she could wish for. I had not seen even the hint of a smile on my mother’s face since her son-in-law had passed away. The plan to go on a pilgrimage made her face beam with joy.

Guruji told my father of his plan to take us on a pilgrimage on the way to the railway station. When he came home, he told of this to mother.

Mother started packing her belongings in a suitcase, so did I. Four days passed, and Guruji arrived at our house on the fifth day. A cook and a servant accompanied him. They also went with us to help us during our journey. We were now five in all. Reservations had already been made for us in a train, which we were to board the same evening.

When we started for the station, Sadei Mishra, a ninety-year-old man of our village, warned me, like Narad had warned Savitri—“Mother, you’re going on a pilgrimage at such a young age. Be careful, for Vrindavan is full of ghosts.” Many villagers walked with us up to the station. A farmer’s daughter, who lived near our house, cried disconsolately as I was going away. I wanted to take her

with me, but everyone advised against the plan—six people travelling together would be inauspicious. I comforted her, saying, “I’ll bring jewellery and bangles and a sari for you. A cousin of mine will stay with father; give her your company. I’ll be back in a few days.” I had to comfort my cousin. I tipped her three rupees, “Keep this. Buy some savouries.” Guruji also gave her two rupees. The villagers bade us farewell at the railway station. We travelled to Calcutta.

We disembarked at the Calcutta station the next morning. Guruji had got a house rented there through someone he knew. We stayed in that house. Bhaskar Chandra Mohapatra, who belonged to Edatala Bhuyan, worked as a contractor at Calcutta Shipping Company. He came to meet us when he got the news of our arrival in Calcutta. He had known Guruji since long. Guruji and he talked to each other for a while and then he left. I remained in purdah in Bhaskar babu’s presence.

In the afternoon, Bhaskar babu came along with his wife riding a car. I talked shop with his wife. His wife said, “You didn’t inform us of your visit earlier. Why did you take this rented house? You could have easily stayed at our house. Anyway, tomorrow we’ll come here again in the morning to pick you up. All of you must come; we’ll have lunch at our place.” Bhaskar babu invited Guruji and then they left.

Mother and I were sitting idly. Guruji told my mother, “I had been to Sidheswarapur. I must have asked your daughter a hundred times. I told her that mother and Pitambari were going on a pilgrimage with me. I pleaded with her to join us. She declined, saying, ‘If I went on pilgrimage, who would watch over my household here? No, no, I can’t go anywhere leaving my estate.’”

Next day, Bhaskar babu came and took us to his home in his car. We all had lunch there. His wife fed me a little *mahaprasad* and made me her god sister-in-law. She also presented new clothes to us. We went to visit the temple of goddess Kali, the zoo and many other places in Calcutta. We dropped them at their residence and were about to leave for our rented house when she offered me ten

thousand rupees. I did not want to take the money but accepted it reluctantly when she coaxed me. Let me not dwell on this.

We were supposed to travel to Rameswar (maybe, we had mistaken Ayodhya as Rameswar). The train took us to Ayodhya. We spent three days there. We had a darshan of the image of Sri Rama. Then we travelled to Haridwar.

We had planned to go to Badrika after spending three, four days at Haridwar. The road to Badrika lay through mountains covered with dense forests. How would we go? We thought we would not be able to walk all the way up. Guruji put the cook and the servant up at some place in Haridwar. Mother, I and Guruji went to Badrika, couched in three baskets, carried by porters.

Inhabitants of Badrika ate roti as their staple food. Though we were not used to eating roti, we had to survive on that. We had a glimpse of the image of Badrinath. Women made various wishes at the holy place. It took us four days to reach Badrinath's temple and five days to come down to Haridwar. After this, we went to Allahabad. We roamed all over the town. By the time we reached the station, the train had left. The station master was all eagerness when he caught sight of me. He moved about the place where I stood. Guruji watched all this from a distance.

The station master called Guruji and asked him confidentially, pointing at me, "Who is she?"

"I work at her place. She's a very wicked woman; she doesn't pay me my salary on time. Tell me, how will I support my family and feed my children?"

"Could you sell her to me?" The station master asked him.

"Sure, why not? I'd sell her to you and go away."

"How much money would you take?"

"If you gave me one thousand rupees, I'd sell her off and go away. She's no one in this world."



The station master agreed to pay the price. “All right then, now take five hundred rupees. Rest I’ll give you later.”

“No problem. Give me five hundred rupees.” Guruji came and introduced him to me and mother.

I thought the bargain had been struck in earnest and started sobbing. Guruji began comforting me. The station master saw me crying and asked Guruji, “Why’s she crying?”

Guruji explained, “I was going to leave her with you. That’s why.”

“Leave her with me soon,” the station master urged him.

Guruji finally brought the episode to an end. He said, “I am not her servant but a government pleader. She’s my sister-in-law. What if I lodged a complaint against you at your higher authorities or show them the money you gave me? How much do you earn that you wish to have a woman like her? Anyway, I won’t take your job. Here, take your money back.”

The station master fell at his feet and begged for forgiveness.

Our train arrived. We journeyed to Prayag; we visited Mathura and Vrindavan after staying there for three, four days. Guruji had written to someone at Vrindavan requesting him to arrange accommodation for us; the owner of the house was away when we reached there. We were received by one of his men at the station and he took us to the house. It was a palatial building inside a large premise. The garden was in full bloom. There was not a single house nearby. Not far away, small mountains stood surrounding the place.

Eight days or so must have passed since our stay. One day, one of our confidants came and told me, “You see, the mahula tree that stands on the premise—we saw someone standing there at the dead of night. Please never go out in the night alone.” I did not believe in his words.

One night, when we were fast asleep we woke up on hearing some sounds that emanated from a room, where the gardener was

sleeping. Every day, he also took the food that was cooked for us. Guruji tried to assure me, saying, “That’s the sound of horses’ hooves stamping the ground.”

“There’s no house nearby. How could there be any horses?” I thought to myself.

Next night, sounds came from that room. I remembered the words of Sadei Mishra of our village. I went down with fever that night. Guruji grew alarmed and we left Vrindavan immediately and proceeded to Mathura.

We stayed there for five days. Guruji taught me for two hours every day at the places where we halted; he also continued with his work and highlighted passages on books till eight at night. At Mathura, we fed a few destitute men and women. From here we went to Benares. How fondly Guruji would show me from the window the blue jays perched on electric wires as our train sped past places!

At Benares, I bought silk saris for Bhaskar babu’s wife, my sister and other cousins; I also bought some clothes for my father. I picked a lot of things from the markets at various places. Guruji would buy me anything that I wanted to.

On our journey back, we had reserved three seats in the first-class compartment. Our cook and servant travelled third class. There were no one other than the three of us; at some station, four British men entered our compartment. Guruji felt scared and, here again, he got a little drama enacted. Who knew what crossed his mind? He started singing these two lines from a certain scripture—*Bolibe jati sange eka ramani* (People would say that one holy man was accompanied by a young woman.) While singing this, he took out a piece of chalk from his box, made a paste by mixing it with water, and rubbed the paste all over my face to give the impression to the sahibs that I was an old woman. Lord Rama had faced such problems in the forest when Sita accompanied him!

The sahibs did not say anything to us. We disembarked at Calcutta, feeling greatly relieved and stayed with Bhaskar Chandra

Mohapatra and his wife. We gave them the gifts we had brought for them. Two days later, we set off for south India. We visited Dandakaranya, Panchavati and Tirupati. On our way back, we went to see Goddess Bhagabati at Banapur, and finally arrived in Puri. At Puri, we fed some Brahmins and had a glimpse of Sri Jagannath. At last, we returned to our village.

On the day we reached our village, the crowd which had gathered in front of our house seemed as large as the ocean of humanity on the day of the ratha jatra in Puri. My beloved Puni came up and paid her respects to me. I had brought for her a sari, a gold chain, silver and glass bangles.

Guruji went back to Cuttack the day after our arrival. A week later, I went to Sidheswarpur with my father to meet my sister. I gave the gifts which I had brought for her from various places we had visited. Father and I stayed there for five days. The pilgrimage had lasted four months. We had spent more than twenty-five thousand rupees on it.

A month passed. One day I received a letter from Guruji. "The auspicious day on which I would start compiling my dictionary has been fixed. Mother and you must come to Cuttack. I'll go to bring you both over here with me after three, four days. Get ready. I went to our village to bring your sister but she did not come with me. She refused, saying 'I may go there at my convenience. I don't think I'll ever go there.'"

Guruji came after three, four days. Mother, I and Puni accompanied him to Cuttack. The auspicious day lay two days away. Mother and I washed the room where the work on compiling the *Dictionary* would commence and drew patterns on its floor with rice batter. On that auspicious day, the room bustled with guests. Images of gods and goddesses such as Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswar, Saraswati, Ganesh, Mahadev and Parvati were brought inside the room. Guruji placed his parents' photographs there. A priest offered flowers to the images, splashed sandalwood paste on them, lighted lamps and burnt incense.

The king of Kalahandi and the king of Athamalika graced the occasion as honoured guests. Guruji started the *boma*. Three pundits, who were appointed to assist Guruji, stood beside him. Five pages of the *Dictionary*, which Guruji had written especially for the occasion, were placed before the images. Guruji and I offered flowers to the deities. Many eminent persons such as Madhusudan Rao were present on the occasion. They all chanted auspicious mantras.

Guruji was the god son of Madhusudan Rao. He loved him so dearly that he would feel restless if he did not see Guruji even for a day. On some days, he would come and stroke Guruji's head and bless him, saying, "Gopal, my son, you're only one of your kind in this world."

At the beginning, none of the kings in Odisha provided any financial help towards the making of the *Dictionary*. Guruji had to mortgage his house. Still, the money thus arranged was far from sufficient. Two pundits had already been appointed and, though the task required the services of two more, he could not appoint them. Other expenses on buying paper, besides the regular household expenses had to be thought of. He continued his work as a pleader to earn money and therefore attended court every day.

He would wake up at twelve or one in the morning to work on the *Dictionary*. I would make fair copy of the four, five pages from what he wrote early in the morning. Two lady teachers came to teach me every day, one in the morning, the other in the afternoon. At ten in the morning, the two pundits would come. They were paid salaries every month. Guruji spent a lot of money towards the expenses of my sister and their son at Sidheswarpur, but she never bothered to send anything to him, not even some rice harvested from his land or a little ghee made at home. She took three thousand rupees from Guruji every month. Guruji had only one servant with him. I felt very sad for Guruji. Once I laid twelve thousand rupees at his feet, but he would not accept even a single rupee from me. I wrote to the assistant who looked after my property at Santha, asking him to send fine rice, coconuts, ghee,

green gram and other things at the earliest. He sent all this stuff in a week's time.

I appointed another servant. I also appointed two more pundits and dissuaded Guruji from attending the court. I told him, "If you go to court every day, the *Dictionary* will never be completed." By that time, the first volume had already been published; the second volume was ready for publication. At this time, Guruji had to seek help from the kings of Odisha; he would travel long distances to meet them. Apart from this, he had to persuade a lot of people to donate money. Often, Guruji pitied his situation and told the pundits working with him—

*There's no misfortune  
more painful than poets having to  
praise fools;  
it is always better  
to stab one's own chest  
and die.*

Whenever I heard him say this, I felt deeply anguished, but how could I help him? Guruji wondered if his dream of bringing out seven volumes of the dictionary would ever be realised. On some days, he would mutter a prayer which went like this, "Almighty, my task is as daunting as building bridges over seven oceans; it would be possible only through your mercy." Now, as for Guruji's daily meals, he would drink half a litre of hot milk at eight at night before going to bed. At seven in the morning, he would drink a glass of milk. In the noon, he would have nearly half a kilo of cooked rice soaked in ghee for lunch. This was all he ate during the whole day. After I came to Cuttack, I gave him a cup of pomegranate juice every day.

On some days, Swami Bichitrananda would come and tell me, "Grandmother, sometimes I ask grandfather, 'You're engaged in such a demanding task. How come you still look so fresh and glowing?' He would reply, 'It's all due to the mercy of your grandmother.'" Even during this time of hardship, he never lost his sense of humour. He gladly took upon himself various

responsibilities. He would take some needy boy to British sahibs and recommend him for some job; he would copy-edit others' books. He also had to proof-read the manuscripts of the dictionary before it was sent to press. On some days, he would chair public meetings. Sometimes, he went to attend tea-parties. If I began telling about this great man, my narrative would never come to an end.

Guruji had instructed the pundits that without his permission they should never cross out even a line from the drafts. He had also instructed that I should check the final draft. He held holy men and monks in high regard. Sometimes, holy men—from Haridwar or Himalayan—would arrive at our place. He would put them up at Bhashakosa ashram and look after them. They would stay here, some for ten days, some for fewer days. He received numerous letters from all over the country every day; he replied to each of these promptly. If ever he planned a journey to some place, whatever might happen, he would unfailingly go there. Once he made up his mind, no one, not even God, could deter him.

The second volume of the *Dictionary* got published. Guruji had written to the Governor General of Delhi about this. His Highness wrote back to him inviting him to meet him in Delhi.

"I've never visited Delhi. I'll go with you and meet the Governor." I said to him.

Guruji asked me, "Will you shake hands with the Governor and his lady?"

"Certainly," I replied.

We went to Delhi. We stayed in a rented house and went to meet the Governor. I was the one who first shook hands with the Governor and his lady. Guruji, too, shook hands with them. He told him about his plans and showed him the two volumes of the *Dictionary*.

Her Highness took me in her arms, kissed me and asked Guruji politely, "I don't have a daughter. Please let her stay with me."

"I would let her if she wants to stay with you." Guruji said.

She spoke to me in Hindi. Though I could not understand what she said fully, I could guess what she meant and declined her offer politely.

Guruji and I took leave of them. We stayed for two, three days more in Delhi, roamed round the city and came back to Cuttack. We brought with us ladoos from Delhi. Even in Delhi, Guruji read and highlighted passages in books, and taught me for two hours every day. He worked very hard; he never harboured any anger or jealousy towards anyone. He was all smiles throughout the day. I never found him ill or tired.

One day Guruji had to walk some distance. That day, he complained of leg pain. In the evening, I warmed a little mustard oil in a small bowl and went to his office room. He was reading a newspaper. He laughed when he saw the bowl in my hand and said, “No one has ever nursed me. I don’t want you to feel let down. Massage my legs a little.” I wanted to massage his legs a little longer, but he did not let me.

There was no proper road to our village. Guruji wrote to the PWD authorities, and got them to build a road. Our villagers requested Guruji to lay the foundation stone of the construction work. They offered a basket filled with a little soil to Guruji to pitch on the road.

Guruji asked them, “Why so little? Fill the basket.” Saying this, he tied a turban on his head and said, “Come on, put the basket on my head.” The young men of our village stood, smiling shyly. Nearly four hundred villagers were present there, but no one dared to do it. After a while, an old man of our village came forward and lifted the basket to his head. The place resounded with *haribol*. Everyone stroked Guruji’s head and blessed him. We—three, four women—stood at a distance and watched the spectacle, speechless.

**(Istahaar, Issue 67, June 1996, pp. 43-54)**



## Gita Hota (1936 - 2022)

Gita Hota was born in 1936 in Jagannathkhunta, Mayurbhanj. Her childhood was spent in Midnapur where she was greatly inspired by the freedom movement. She was married to Satakadi Hota, an Indian Railway Service officer and writer. She has to her credit three short story collections, a novel, and three books for children. She is the founder-editor of well-known Odia literary journal, *Amrutayana*, which was first published in January 1981. The magazine, which carries her thoughtful, stimulating editorials, has helped groom numerous young writers in Odisha.

Her memoir, *Sabu smruti madhura* (Sweet Memories) was serialised in the daily *Samaya* before it was published in the form of a book in 2000. As someone widely, who has travelled over the country, she takes a keen interest in public affairs and offers her opinions on them. The excerpt included here presents a clear and telling portrait of the publishing scene in Odisha in the 1970s. It describes the early influences on her sensibility and her life as the publisher and editor of *Amrutayana*.

### Birth of Amrutayana

When Satakadi babu got transferred to Bhubaneswar towards the end of December 1979, we came and lived in a quarters near Capital Hospital. The quarters faced the rabies ward. Sometimes, we would hear the heart-wrenching cries of rabies patients, which filled the surroundings with an air of morbidity. A few days after our stay, the flame trees growing in front of and around our quarters came into flower. Humankind feels a strange affinity with the red flowers of



the flame tree. Red blood flows in their veins. The blood-red flag of the communists symbolises the struggle of the downtrodden. Labourers worldwide salute the red flag.

The flowers brought back the memory of a past incident. I was once a student at Nayabasana High School, Midnapur. The leaders of Vande Mataram group gave a call for an armed struggle. They believed that the British would never give in to Gandhiji's non-violent, civil disobedience movement. They must be driven out of the country through an armed struggle. I was then a student in the primary classes. The task assigned to us was to march on the road singing revolutionary songs, which they had taught us. A desire to write poems filled me while humming these songs. When I studied in higher classes, I would now and then scribble a few lines. As I grew older, the desire to write poems grew even more intense.

My father was the headmaster of the Nayabasana School, where he taught Sanskrit. Sometimes, the revolutionaries would hide themselves in our house for a couple of days. For this reason, my heart would expand at the sight of the colour red, and innumerable thoughts stirred within me and sought to express themselves. I would feel relieved if I could write a poem or sing a few lines of the songs which I had learnt from the revolutionaries. Hundreds of lilies would blossom in my heart like it blooms in a pond in autumn.

Since childhood, I have been fond of literature. My intense love for literature remained unchanged even after I came to Satakadi babu's house after marriage. When I sat alone, I would set down my stray thoughts on a piece of paper. I must have been twenty-one or twenty-two when we came to live in Calcutta. My eldest daughter had been born by then. I had written some poems and short stories during that period. But, later, I remained absorbed in the cares of life; my creative urge lay like blades of grass crushed under a slab of stone. And yet, the wish to write something new never ever died in my mind. This was the reason why I sometimes picked up a brush to paint or staged plays or performed dance numbers with friends. Wherever I stayed, the artist hidden in me always spurred me to do something new.

When I came to live in Bhubaneswar, my restlessness grew intense watching the flame tree in bloom. Rabindranath Tagore describes the beauty of the tree in the lines—*Agun lagechhe dale dale*—the branches of flame trees look as though they have caught fire. One day, while I was looking out of the window at the flowers, a group of boys entered my room, calling out, “Aunt, aunt.” They were—Purnendu, Pradipta, Kumud and Sudip—sons of the officers living in our neighbourhood. They were college-going students. I found in them a desire to do something new. I casually suggested if we could try and bring out a magazine. They liked my idea and grew so enthusiastic that we decided to publish a magazine.

After a few weeks, we left the quarters near the hospital and shifted to bungalow number seven in Forest Park. The same sight caught my attention—on both sides of the road stood flame trees in full bloom. The young boys had not forgotten my words. They came to take a final decision about publishing a magazine. We decided to bring out a quarterly.

We discussed our plan with Satakadi babu. He liked it and encouraged us. We could not decide on a name of the quarterly. To find a solution to our problem we prayed to Sri Jagannath and our problem was solved in no time. The magazine was named, *Amrutayana*. However, one cannot bring out a magazine simply through one’s goodwill and eagerness; one must make proper arrangements. We registered it at the ADM office and informed the public information department. We collected donations and began to solicit articles. We bought paper and zeroed on a printing press to print the first issue. The first issue was scheduled to be inaugurated on 26 January 1981, the auspicious republic day of India.

I went to Cuttack and requested Babuji—Radhanath Rath, editor, the *Samaj*—to release the first issue of the magazine. He gave his consent. The poet, Sitakanta Mohapatra accepted our request to be the guest of honour. The release ceremony was organised at the conference hall of Nehru Yuva Kendra. A number of young

writers and well-wishers had come to encourage us. Babuji released the first issue of *Amrutayana* and dedicated it to readers. He spoke how literature inspired us to walk on the right path, how literature made human life colourful and left a deep impact on it. He prayed that Sri Jagannath's blessings be always with the magazine and donated five hundred rupees to its fund.

Sitakanta babu spoke of the universal and eternal appeal of Odia literature and impressed everyone. The afternoon sun poured its mellow rays on Bhubaneswar. It poured its rays on the flame trees by the roadside, in gardens, and all over the place and seemed to announce the equality of all human beings. *Amrutayana* was born.

I had become a mother by then, but when we started *Amrutayana*, I felt as if I had given birth to a baby after carrying it for ten months in my womb. Our bungalow in Forest Park was crowded with guests who flocked to see *Amrutayana* in my lap and celebrated its arrival. The number of magazines published in Odia was very small then. The same holds true even after the passage of two decades. I feel surprised when I think how my love for literature led me to edit a literary magazine. Earlier my interest was confined to reading different authors but after I took up the editorship of *Amrutayana*, many writers sent their writings to me. I read them once or twice before selecting them for publication.

Editing a magazine is a huge responsibility. I have tried to shoulder this responsibility competently. Many young authors would come to my house bringing with them their short stories or poems. We would discuss all manner of things. While taking leave, everyone would repeat the same thing—"Aunt, please publish my piece in the next issue..." They came to me with so much hope that it was not possible to say "yes" or "no" on their face. I tried to publish some writings of new authors along with those of veteran authors. When I read a piece of writing, I felt as though I wandered in the world of imagination of the author. All the published pieces were not of the same quality; creativity varied from one individual to the other. I sought to encourage young writers, who were at the

beginning of their career. I never shrank from editing a piece of writing if it could be rendered publishable after a bit of editing. Still I could not satisfy everyone all the time.

Publishing a magazine becomes easier if one had a printing press or an outlet selling magazines. We had nothing. Publishing *Amrutayana* depending solely on the enthusiasm of four young men, who were like my sons, was surely a daring step. It was easy to publish a souvenir, but to publish a magazine once every three months is, as the saying goes, like rushing into the battleground without carrying a sword and a shield. However, when the first issue came out, I had the good fortune to receive praise from many. Once one embarks on a journey one cannot retrace one's steps—this saying gave me the courage to face all difficulties and march ahead. An established magazine incurs loss if it does not get enough advertisements. Only twenty-five percent of the expenditure is recovered from the sale of the copies of a magazine. The distributors take twenty-five to thirty-five percent commission. There are also the expenses made on binding the magazines and postage.

We had to slog hard to bring out the first few issues. I sought the help of Satakadi babu and his friends for getting advertisements for the magazine. I would go to companies and corporate offices with my assistant editors to ask for advertisements. One could gather writing from authors easily; the most difficult part in bringing out a magazine is, in my view, collecting advertisements. I had to go to a place four, five times to collect an advertisement and again, four, five times, to collect money from them. Sometimes, I had to come back empty-handed, when I could not meet the concerned authority at an advertising agency or the agent. In evenings, I would sit in our lawn or on the veranda and look at the blue sky and pray to Sri Jagannath to keep his merciful eye on us and remove all the obstacles from our path. He surely answered my prayers. Otherwise, how would all the obstacles surprisingly disappear from the path of a housewife like me?

## Determination Ensures Success

After the first issue of *Amrutayana* got published, my responsibilities multiplied. In the first issue, we had declared that it would be published once every three months. But, I gradually realised the gap between setting oneself a task and accomplishing it. Purnendu, Pradipta, Sudipta, Girish and other enthusiastic young boys left all the responsibilities on me and said—“Aunt, it can’t go on without you. We can only help you in collecting donations.”

When I agreed to be the editor, I did not think about the difficulties involved. I believed it would be accomplished as all good deeds were accomplished with the help of others. Our chief problem was how to arrange the money required for paper, printing and other related expenses. The boys brought in some donations; some money was collected by selling copies of the first issue and some from advertisements. I also offered some money. Still, more money was needed. Once you step into a river, you have no option but to cross the river and reach the embankment. The enthusiasm of young boys gradually waned, but my interest hardened into determination. Napoleon had said—“The word ‘impossible’ is not in my dictionary.” I also remembered inspiring lines written by Odia poets.

It is said, “If there’s a will, there’s a way.” Lack of funds can never stop a good deed from being accomplished. I was determined to overcome all obstacles and get *Amrutayana* registered. I filled out a form and submitted it at the ADM’s office, Bhubaneswar. Earlier, *Amrutayana* society had been set up for social work. I decided to publish the magazine officially on behalf of the society. I exerted myself to bring out *Amrutayana* regularly. Sri Maa has said, “One who jumps forward is blessed.” Auspicious moments do not arrive often in life to start a new venture. Whenever one such moment does arrive, it should be utilised to achieve success. The ADM registered *Amrutayana*, and after that, it got registered at the Registrar of Newspapers of India.

When I was the editor, Girish Chandra Das worked as the managing editor and Satakadi Hota remained its advisor. We

did not get the certificate from RNI as soon as we would have liked to have it. Luckily, there was no magazine registered under the name *Amrutayana* in India. So, after going to Delhi a couple of times and requesting the officers concerned, we finally got a registration number in 1982. In the mean time, the magazine was being published regularly. First, it was printed at Shanta Press in Bhubaneswar. Later, it was printed at Radhanath Co-operative Press in Cuttack. *Amrutayana* became popular among writers in no time; readers also liked it. The readership of the magazine no longer remained confined within Cuttack, Bhubaneswar and Puri, and now spread to different parts of Odisha and outside.

While the circulation and popularity of the magazine increased, Satakadi babu got transferred to Calcutta and was appointed as the chief business director of railways by the central government on 19 April 1985. After a few days, he was allotted a government quarters there, but I stayed back in Bhubaneswar to bring out *Amrutayana*. I shifted to a small flat near BJB college hostel, which had no telephone connection. I had no servants or housemaids. Nevertheless, I stayed there to be able to publish *Amrutayana*. Girish was always there with me, and the two of us would go to Cuttack to supervise the printing of *Amrutayana*. At times, we had to spend a whole day surviving on nothing but a cup of coffee or a glass of water while waiting at Radhanath Co-operative Press in Cuttack.

I visited various offices in the hope of getting an advertisement. When all doors seemed closed, help came from unexpected sources. This, I felt in my bones, was due to the infinite mercy of Sri Jagannath. Girish had neglected his household responsibilities and worked for *Amrutayana* selflessly. I could live in a rented house in BJB Nagar paying one thousand rupees per month from the profit *Amrutayana* made. As I have never been able to give royalty to authors, I and Girish worked for *Amrutayana* without taking any remuneration. Tears well into my eyes when I remember those hard days. Sri Jagannath's mercy fills my heart with tranquillity and courage.

Satakadi babu faced various difficulties as he lived alone in Calcutta; I would go to Calcutta to be with him now and then. The publication of *Amrutayana* got irregular in my absence, so I got it printed at the Saswati Printing Press at Premchand Baral Street in Calcutta. The owner of the press, Nrusingha babu was a competent man; he would generously proofread the magazine. When *Amrutayana* was published from Calcutta, *Pratibeshi* was published by Utkal Siksha Sansad. At that time, Satakadi babu was the editor of *Pratibeshi*. By 1986, *Amrutayana* had an all-Odisha readership, and it also found readership in neighbouring places such as Kharagpur, Jamshedpur, Raipur, Visakhapatnam, Bhubaneswar, Ranchi, and Santiniketan. By 1986-87, its circulation figures grew from two thousand to four, five thousand.

During my stay in Calcutta, I felt that the interest in reading Odia magazines was growing among readers. If the publishers and booksellers could strengthen the distribution process of books and magazines, readers could get to read them easily. In Odisha, there is no reputed agency that sells magazines. Once a magazine comes out of the press, the editor has to pack the copies and send them to agents at different places. Odisha is the only state in India where the editor of a magazine has to collect writings, arrange advertisements, get it printed at a press, send copies to agents, collect money, and do all other chores, and, for all this, the editor receives no remuneration except a sense of contentment and the good will of writers and readers.

### **Ma Phaleshu Kadachana**

One can exercise control over one's action but not over the consequences of one's action. It is not easy to perform any work remaining detached from it, nevertheless one should strive for it. I decided to publish *Amrutayana* as a monthly. It might have been good news for the readers, but those who were engaged in this work know publishing a monthly magazine was no easy job.

Even though Odisha became a separate province on the basis of language in April 1936, only fifty percent of its population is literate. The slow spread of education, lack of proper initiatives and

financial constraints account for the negligible interest in reading among Odias. Not even five magazines get published in Odisha regularly. In 1990, the number was three. *Jhankar*, started by Dr. Harekrushna Mahtab, continues to be published because it is brought out by the Prajatantra Prachar Samiti and, even though it incurs losses continuously for fifty years, the institution has the resources to bring it out regularly. A magazine or a newspaper cannot be managed with the money from the sale of copies. Everybody must know that only twenty-five percent of the expenditure comes from the sale. I don't feel reluctant to say that publishing a monthly magazine is a bold decision on the part of an ordinary person like me.

One day, Satakadi babu said, "This decision is certainly a daring one. No good deed has ever been accomplished without courage. We'll have to look after *Amrutayana* as we've nurtured our five children. If we can't make it stand on its own legs, we should look upon it as a child who has gone astray. Our condition would be like the parents of children who go astray." Once I made up my mind, I never looked back. I marched forward keeping faith in Sri Jagannath. I believed that I would be successful and so *Amrutayana* got published every month since January 1990.

I had written in the editorial of the first issue of monthly *Amrutayana* that it was surely ambitious to publish a monthly magazine when the cost of paper and other expenses were rising, and when it was not possible to get advertisements on a regular basis, and when its circulation was limited.

Ambition gives birth to the new; it gives rise to efficiency and unshakable faith. Ambition lays the foundation for future success. *Amrutayana* does not help me earn my livelihood; it provides an outlet for my creativity. Of the boys who worked with me at the beginning, Purnendu left this mortal world at a young age. In course of time, the others went their way, but Girish continues to work with me. He is now the managing director of *Amrutayana*. Prabir and Niranjana work sincerely. Deba, Samir, Sarat and Abhay have chosen their separate courses of action. All of them have been shaped by me and helped



me accomplish my task. Kaniska and Kavita worked with me for a while before joining a different place of work.

Sri Aurobindo has said that we don't belong to yesterday, we belong to tomorrow. Moving ahead demands courage. Though Odia magazines sell, the agents don't pay the publishers regularly. Sometimes they do not make the payment and appropriate all the sale proceeds. Advertisements are the only source of revenue for monthly magazines, but who would offer advertisements on a regular basis?

Odisha is not a centre of trade and commerce nor is it an industrially developed state. It is futile to expect advertisements from private companies. Though we occasionally get advertisements from government organisations, the process is indescribably complicated. It depends on the will of the authorities; no specific rule is followed in this respect even now. The government departments give advertisements to daily newspapers out of fear. Why should they care for literary magazines? On the other hand, ministers, administrators and the elite expect to get complimentary copies of the magazine. The most unfortunate thing is that even the educated people outside the government machinery expect to get free copies of the magazine. No magazine can survive if it depends on lower-middle class readers. To get an advertisement, one has to run to an office four, five times, and again to receive payment one has to run two, three times. At the end of the day, we actually get seven hundred rupees from an advertisement worth one thousand rupees. Sometimes one has to please people in various ways to get this work done. Above all, advertisement is a respectable business at the national level, but in Odisha, it destroys your sense of self-respect.

After *Amrutayana* was published as a monthly magazine for a year, our calculations proved wrong. We thought it was not possible to retrace our steps, and when we were groping for solutions to our problems, a friend suggested that we try to secure agents for getting advertisements from commercial firms. Though Satakadi babu had spent long years in Kolkata, this thought had never crossed his mind nor had it ever occurred to me. There are professional institutions, which provide advertisements. There is huge competition in this field.

With the spread of television and electronic media, the importance of such professional advertising agencies has increased. To create a market for the products and to inform the consumers about the quality of the products and to get the better of others in the competition—they offer advertisements. These agencies operate through a proper system. They take fifteen percent of the advertisements collected and agents take ten percent. As a result, after this twenty-five percent and other related expenditure of ten percent are deducted, the magazines or newspapers get nearly sixty-five percent of the money. These companies have their offices in metros such as New Delhi, Kolkata, and Mumbai. Besides they have offices in Hyderabad, Madras, Bangalore, Ahmedabad and other cities.

As the market in Odisha depends on Kolkata, Delhi and Mumbai, a magazine publisher must have representatives in these three cities. One has to spend a lot of money initially in this process, though one can never be sure how much one would get from advertisements over two, three years. To recruit three representatives of *Amrutayana* in three metros and another in Bangalore, we needed five lakh rupees. I had to spend my meagre savings and nearly four lakh rupees from the pension Satakadi babu had received after retirement.

*Amrutayana* started as a magazine of literature. I decided to include other subjects and print the photograph of a woman on its cover to enhance its appeal. As no Odia woman was willing to let her photo appear on the cover of a magazine, I brought photos of women from Mumbai and Kolkata. Once, in response to my request, Sanjukta Panigrahi, the legendary Odishi danseuse, gave her photograph to be printed on the cover of *Amrutayana*. Next, Kumkum Mohanty, another renowned Odishi dancer, let us print her photograph on the cover. After this, there was no problem in getting photographs of Odia women. They were eager to get their photos printed on the cover of the magazine. In fact, many now wait to see the beautiful face of a woman on the cover of *Amrutayana*.

(Sabu smruti madhura, pp. 133-145)



## Pratibha Ray (b. 1944)

Pratibha Ray was born on 21 January 1944 in a village in Jagatsinghpur, Odisha. She graduated in Botany honours from Ravenshaw College. She married Akshaya Chandra Ray, an engineer in the state public work department, in 1967. In 1968, she joined the Kanyashram in Kapilas as its headmistress. She completed M.A. in Education in 1974 and Ph.D. in Educational Psychology in 1982. She taught at various Government Colleges in Odisha before joining the Odisha Public Service Commission as a member in 1998. She has been a member of various learned societies; at present, she is the chairperson of the Jnanpith Selection Board.

Pratibha Ray's first novel, *Barsha Basanta Baishakha* was published in 1974. Since then she has gone on to pen more than sixty books which include novels, short story collections, travelogues and children's books. One of the most prolific and popular writers in Odisha, she has received Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel, *Shilapadma* in 1985; the Sarala Award in 1990 and the Moorti Devi Award for her novel, *Yajnaseni* in 1991. She has received the Central Sahitya Akademi award for the short story collection, *Ullanghana* in 2000. In 2011, she received the Jnanpith Award for her contribution to Indian literature. She is the recipient of Odisha Living Legend Award in 2013. The Government of India conferred on her Padma Shri in 2007 and Padma Bhusan in 2022 for her contribution to literature.

Her autobiography *Padma patrare jeevan* (Life on a Lotus Leaf) was serialised under the title "Amruta anwasha" in the monthly

magazine, *Amrutayana*. The excerpts included here depict two memorable incidents of her life. In the first excerpt, she fondly recalls her experience of seeing her poem in print for the first time in 1955, when she was a school girl. In a striking contrast, the second excerpt shows the dilemmas she faced while trying to reconcile the conflicting claims made on her by her marriage and her career. Caught between various roles, she seems to find herself in a labyrinth and tries desperately to escape it.

### **First Flush of Delight**

I don't know how and when a soft seed of poetry fell into the realm of my mind. I still don't know. I was barely nine or ten. I did not dream of becoming a poet. I was filled with a dream of flowing like poetry. Poetry woke me up at midnight; poetry buzzed in my mind before dawn. I felt that I was crossing the limit of an ideal pupil by deviating from my studies and scribble random lines of poems. I was filled with diffidence, and yet, I kept writing poems secretly. It was as though I was writing forbidden love letters. However, there was no way I would know whether they merited as poems. Nevertheless, there was no respite from writing poems. When I was in my fourth and fifth grade, I scribbled quite a few pages of poetry forcing lines to rhyme. I did not know who would assure me that by writing poetry I did not cross the line of discipline; hence poetry and reluctance clandestinely walked hand in hand. I held our school history teacher, Sri Abhilash Nayak in deep respect. I thought that I could confide in him. His benign personality had impressed this poetry loving girl. One day I told him, "Sir, if you don't disclose it to my father, I'll tell you something."

"Tell me. No matter how big a mistake, it can be mended."  
He assured me.

"Is it wrong to write poems? If someone wrote poems in study hours, will you be angry?"

His face seemed to brighten; he said, "Oh, you're writing poems without the knowledge of your father? But he'll be happy if he gets to know this. He loves literature. Why would he be angry with you?"

“I’ve written quite a few poems – Dawn, Arrival of Spring, Evening Queen, Blue lilies, Shower, River Alaka, My Mother, God of the Poor, Why Untouchable, Little Bird, Mango Blossoms ...”

“My goodness,” he was taken by surprise, “so many poems!”

“But they’re no good. I don’t like any of them. The day I write good poems, you may inform my father. That day I’ll show him my poems.”

He patted me tenderly and said, “You’re true to your name, Pratibha. You write in your own style. Yes, you must get your poems published. Then when your father finds out, he would be pleasantly surprised. Now I keep this between us. But remember, it’s not a crime to write poems.”

Now I wondered how my poems would get published. Among the magazines meant for children, my father subscribed the magazine, *Mo desa*, which was edited by poet Bira Kishore Das. I read it regularly, but for postal delays or some other problems, we did not receive it regularly. In that magazine, one section was meant for child contributors. This section was called “Sishu palatana”. I don’t know why I didn’t like that section. The use of the word “palatana” perhaps created a wrong impression on my mind. Another attractive page for children was, Meena bazar – it was the children’s page published every Thursday in the news daily, *Prajatantra*, established by Harekrushna Mahtab. Jahuri bhai’s letter in its page, the jewels of “Meena bazaar” and the pen friend section drew my attention. At that time, “Meena bazaar” provided the soil on which most of the writers and poets of our generation grew. I was very fond of it. Newspapers like *Samaj*, *Prajatantra*, and *Amrita Bazaar* came to our school in my father’s name as he was the head master. I would request the school peon after school and get the “Meena bazaar” page to read at times.

In those days, students tried hard to keep their classroom clean and beautiful under the supervision of their respective class teachers. Luckily, that year it was decided that students would raise a fund and procure a newspaper in every class. At that time, very few

people subscribed to newspapers at home. In our class I proposed that we should subscribe *Prajatantra*. Our class teacher, Kulamani Swain, who was also our literature teacher, agreed to my proposal, and *Prajatantra* was subscribed. But my problem did not solve with this arrangement. The “Meena bazaar” page didn’t come to my hand on Thursdays, which was my sole objective behind the proposal of subscribing to *Prajatantra*.

I tried to find a way by which I could personally procure *Prajatantra*. Where would I get so much money required for a monthly subscription? I took my younger second cousin Gulu to my confidence. He received quite an amount of money as he was living at his maternal uncle’s house; my grandmother gave him money time to time. If she gave him one rupee, she would give me one anna only. I coaxed him and collected the required amount of money from him to procure only the Thursday’s *Prajatantra*.

One day during the hot noon we crossed the old, rotten wooden bridge over Machhagaon canal and reached the post office. We ran into trouble as we did not know that we needed to fill up a money order form to send money. I was in class six, he was in four. Who would fill the money order form on our behalf? I didn’t have the patience to wait another day to send the money. I also feared that Gulu might want to take back his money any moment. I asked Gulu to wait for me there and ran in the direction of our school with the money order form in hand. I feared if I got late, the postal bus would leave with that day’s post and would not carry my form. The wooden bridge road was long and winding. The path lying through fields was much shorter and one could reach the school gate in less time. In summer, water was less in the canal. People often waded through the water to go to the other side. I also entered the canal, the form in hand. Water slowly touched my waist and then my neck. My obsession for poetry did not let me calculate that canal water which touched knee level of adults would touch my neck. But there was no question of going back. I raised my hand and held the form above my head and carefully waded through the neck deep water and reached the school thoroughly

wet. The school premise was quiet; Kulamani sir lived alone in an adjacent room near the school office. The door was closed from inside. I knocked on the door impatiently overcoming my fear of him. Awoke from sleep, he opened the door and was astonished to see me in dripping, wet clothes.

“What happened? Did anyone push you? Where? Who pushed you?”

Without answering his questions, I said in a desperate tone of voice, “Sir, the postal bus will leave soon. Please fill up this form without delay. I’ll tell everything later. I came through the canal because I wanted to send the money order to *Prajatantra* today.”

He understood my desperation. He filled up the form and was going to say something; I snatched the form from his hand, turned, and ran in the direction of the canal.

I could hear him saying aloud, “You come to school tomorrow! I’ll cure your insolence. Listen, don’t go through the canal. If you slipped, you’d lose your life...”

Now on, I received a copy of Thursday’s *Prajatantra* every Friday. I was not lucky to see my poem in print though. I would not sleep at night on Thursday nights – if ever I fell asleep, I would dream of reading my poem in the Meena bazaar pages of *Prajatantra* – morning would break, the post would arrive. I would hold the pages of Meena bazaar. My heart would race and my hands would shake as though I was going to read my examination result; I would look through the pages of Meena bazaar and feel dejected. Then I thought to myself if I peppered my poems with difficult words like the words we read in our literature book, my poems would be published. I brought a dictionary and made a list of less used synonyms for common words like sun, moon, sky, earth, wind. I wrote a new poem titled, “The Cursed Girl” and sent it to Meena bazaar. I was pretty sure that the poem would be published in the forthcoming issue. I was certain that there was no reason why such a poem full of difficult words would not get published. I had told

Abhilash sir that my poem would be published in Meena bazaar. But that Thursday was cursed; the poem which I thought was my best poem did not get published. I felt dejected and told Abhilash sir, “Sir, my poems aren’t really poems. My poems with simple words didn’t get published. I wrote a poem using difficult words but that too didn’t get published. I don’t think I can write good poems.”

“You send hundred poems to Meena bazaar. If your poem isn’t published even after that, you say this. No one becomes a poet overnight. Yes, poems aren’t written following a dictionary. When you express your feelings in your own words it touches everyone’s heart. Who told you to write poems using difficult words from the dictionary? I’m sure your poems would be published. You need dedication and patience for that,” he told me affectionately.

I followed his words and kept writing poems and sending them. In the mean time, I had passed grade five and six. I was in grade seven. Our class teacher was Sri Narottam Mohanty. He was very affectionate as well as very strict. We held him in high regard mixed with fear. One Friday, a copy of *Prajatantra* reached in my name. He opened the Meena bazaar page and glanced through it. My heart raced – as though my examination result would be declared – pass or fail. Suddenly he looked at me and said, “Who’s this girl? Pratibha Das, Balukuda High School! You write poems? As soon as I heard this I felt so overcome by joy that I forgot that I was in my class room and the strict disciplinarian, Narottam sir was reading my poem. I rose from my seat, snatched the paper from his hand and ran towards my father’s office room across the play ground. He was the head teacher of our school. My father was sitting among a group of teachers. I entered his office and said breathlessly – “Bapa, see my poem is published in Meena bazaar!”

My father took the paper from my hand and read my poem through his glasses and declared in an overwhelming voice – “Bhaskar babu! Basu babu! Kulamani babu! See this! My daughter has become a poet!”

My father’s close friend, Hari Biswal, who was a renowned



freedom fighter of that region, arrived at his office. My father repeated his declaration to him –“Hari babu, see my daughter has become a poet!” Whoever he met that day, he repeated the same words.

The publication of my poem in Meena bazaar along with my father’s tender declaration and fervent appreciation gave me the recognition and reward I needed at that moment. I still cherish that moment as a writer and I will always cherish that moment, which was much above other rewards I received for my writing later in life. It could not be compared with any other experience. I owe my indebtedness to many for my literary career but the foremost among them was Dr. Harekrushna Mahtab, the editor of *Prajatantra*, and my most favourite, Meena bazaar.

**(“Amrutayana”, November 2003, pp. 8-10)**

### **In a Labyrinth**

I went to the Kapilas Kanyashram with my three children. The eldest one was two-years-old, the second one was a year old, and the third was only one month old. I had lost my earlier enthusiasm as the fear of snakes scared me and haunted me like a ghost. One incident had happened before my third child was born. I felt very weak those days. I could not even move properly. My younger sister and elder sister’s son had come to visit me. The doors of the room adjacent to my bed room lay open. At this time, a hissing sound could be heard from the room. A hen was sitting over its eggs, which she had laid on a bed that stood in a corner of the room. The sound grew louder and seemed like the whimper of a cat.

Mochiram’s youngest son stayed at my house. He used to play with my children and slept near his father. He was sitting in the veranda, eating something. Mochiram was sitting in the yard. When he heard the sound, he shone on a torch into the room and saw a huge cobra hitting the hen’s box with its hood. “Snake, snake,” he cried and closed the doors of the room. He also closed my room from outside but the gap between the doors of the room and the floor was such that a snake could easily crawl through it. I could not

move from my place. My sister helped me to the bed. We hung the mosquito net and prayed to lord Shiva.

Mochiram held his son in his arms and took him out. He called out to other peons living in the neighbourhood. Everybody came with staves and crowbars. By that time, the snake had half slithered into a hole in the floor. It was pulled out of the hole and killed with great difficulty. The next day, I took maternity leave and set off for Cuttack with my children. When the period of leave came to an end, I had to come back to my quarters. My mind became heavy with worries the moment I entered the gates of Kanyashram. Various problems of the Kanyashram kept me occupied. However, I could establish some kind of an order there.

When I worked at the Kanyashram, I had written my resignation letter nearly ten times in four years. The reason was my husband's excessive possessiveness towards me. On holidays, my husband would come to my quarters. Those days many officials came to visit Kapilas and then dropped in to inspect the school without any prior notice. As soon as they arrived at the school, I had to receive them. I would not be able to come back to my quarters till they left. My husband did not want to understand that my job demanded this nor did my guests ever realise that I had a home and family to care for.

When I came back home, I had to face my husband's ire. He would remark sarcastically that the main attraction of this job for me was the opportunity to meet these officials. What sort of a job was this? How much salary did it offer that one had to stay in a forest for its sake? What's the need to do a job? Who cares for your salary? So on and so forth. Sometimes, the situation became so unpleasant that we would not even have our meals. I would not enter into any kind of argument and immediately sit down to write out a letter of resignation. I would call Hadibandhu and hand it to him and instruct him to submit it at the Dhenkanal office. At such moments, I would really lose all interest in my job. I found myself in a labyrinth, with

three children to look after and on top of it, the responsibility of managing the girl students and colleagues in a forest school.

When my husband cooled down, he would bring back the resignation letter from Hadibandhu and tear it up. He never regarded my job as a proper job. Actually, he never wanted a working wife. If my eldest brother-in-law had not been a progressive man, like my two sisters-in-law, I would have spent my life decking myself with jewellery and become a child-producing machine. If we look at it differently, in reality, my sisters-in-law lived like queens. With many servants at their beck and call, they did not even pour a glass of water to themselves nor did they serve food to themselves. In contrast, I was like a daily labourer. All my life, I have toiled inside and outside home. I have never spent a day relaxing at my rich husband's house. When I was in Dhenkanal, I had stayed only a few days with him. All my days were spent doing my job and in travelling when I enrolled for post-graduation.

After my third child was born, my husband got promoted to the post of an assistant engineer. He went on deputation to Rural Engineering Organisation in Dhenkanal and took quarters there so that I could stay with him. The quarters stood across the Dhenkanal bus station. This was the first and the last time I stayed in his quarters with our children. Then I went and stayed at our house in Cuttack with the children and looked after their studies and carried on with my job. Till the day he retired, I had never had a chance to stay in his quarters.

At the beginning of 1971, I left my job as a headmistress under the Tribal Development Department and applied for the post of Assistant Teacher in the Education Department. Many teachers had left their jobs and joined other departments before me, but no one ever received the same scale of pay. Everybody warned me that applying for the job would be an exercise in futility. Many tried to dissuade me from doing this saying that there was no reason why I should leave a secure job after doing it for four years. After the snake was found in my quarters, almighty only knew how

I lived there with my three children. When my husband was allotted an official quarters in Dhenkanal, I immediately shifted there. This, however, did not solve my problem. Buses did not ply from the town to where my school was. Besides, as it was a residential school, the headmistress was not permitted to live away from the campus.

Once, I had been to Cuttack with my children during the holidays. Some students slept in the front room of my quarters as there was no space even in the dormitory. I did not know this. One night, around ten o'clock, a snake bit a sixteen-year-old girl in my quarters. Anjana De, a trained graduate assistant teacher, was in charge of the school. What could she have done? Before a bullock cart could be arranged to take the girl to Dhenkanal hospital, she died. The Kanyashram resonated with the sound of howling cries.

It was perhaps the saddest incident in the history of the Kanyashram. I came back from Cuttack three, four days after this incident took place. The girl's father did not utter a word of complaint. He consoled Anjana De saying that his daughter was fated to die of snake-bite; even if she had stayed at home that night, she would have been bitten by a snake. He requested her to bury his daughter in the grove inside the Kanyashram premises. His daughter's spirit would stay forever at Kanyashram in this way—saying this, he broke down.

His request was honoured. The girl mingled with the soil of Kanyashram; she would be there in the sweetness of mangoes, jackfruits, and cashew fruits. The girl died in Anjana's presence and she could not save her life. She could not get over this feeling of regret. I felt deeply anguished by the incident which happened in my absence. My heart was no longer in Kanyashram. I thought it was no longer safe to stay there with my children. I wished the girls had not come to sleep in my quarters. This wound in my heart would never heal.

**(Amruta anwasha, “Amrutayana”, November 2008, pp. 12-14)**



## Pratibha Satpathy (b. 1945)

Pratibha Satpathy was born on 18 January 1945 in Satyabhamapur, Cuttack. Her father, Chakradhar Satpathy was a doctor. She was educated at Ravenshaw College, Cuttack. She was married to Nityananda Satpathy, academic and critic of Odia Literature. Pratibha Satpathy taught Odia literature at various colleges in Odisha. She received the teachers' fellowship awarded by the University Grant Commission to undertake a study of romanticism in Odia poetry. She also received the major research project awarded by the University Grant Commission to carry out research on the portrayal of women's existence in Odia poetry.

She has been writing poetry in Odia for more than forty years. Her debut collection of poems, *Ama Kavita* was published in 1962. She has penned more than forty books that include anthologies of poems, essays and translation. She has translated the works of well-known writers such as Pearl S. Buck, Isaac Bashevis Singer and Chinghiz Aitmatov into Odia. She was the co-editor of one of the leading Odia magazines, *Istabaar* for twenty-five years.

In 1986, Pratibha Satpathy received Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award for her poetry collection, *Nimishe akshara*. She received the Sarala Award for her poetry collection, *Shabari* in 1992. She got the prestigious Central Sahitya Akademi Award for her poetry book, *Tanmaya Dhuli* in 2001. She received the coveted Kabeer Samman in 2015 for her contribution to Indian literature.

Her memoir, *Saisabaru sansar* (Of Innocence and Experience) was published in 2008. She remembers her village, her childhood and the growth of her poetic self. The excerpt included here explores

the strained relationship between her parents and how her father left her mother for another woman. Her childhood memories seem to haunt her as she tries to come to terms with her disillusionment in the present.

### **Goddess of my Heart**

Desire

carried my father away  
on the wings of a bird  
filled his heart with blue  
and made him dance  
to the movement of a snake.  
my mother's eyes, a sea of tears,  
a few cowries in her hands  
and poison in her mouth. ("The Rainbow," 1978)

Lay on the middle shelf of our huge wooden closet, which remained unlocked most of the time, a decorative wooden box. The closet was never locked because we did not keep money or gold jewellery in it. Mother kept her gold jewellery in a hole dug in the floor of our kitchen. She had smeared the floor with cow-dung and laid a few bricks on it. On the bricks stood tin cans containing oil, rice flakes, puffed rice and pulses. A few old scriptures and books were stacked in the closet. The wooden box containing a few letters lay on its middle shelf.

One day, I chanced upon a particularly long letter while rummaging in the box. It was a letter written in a beautiful hand in a refined diction which expressed deep emotions. I had never seen a letter like this, let alone read one. I could know from the handwriting that it was my father's hand. He sent letters home regularly, but this letter was of a different kind. I must have been twelve or thirteen then. I was eager to learn what the letter said. The letter ran into four pages. After I finished reading the first page, I knew that my father had written this in 1936 to my mother. It must have come by post though the envelope which had contained it was not there. I and my eldest brother were not even born at the time. My eldest sister must have been two or three. Still, the letter was well-preserved.

My father was a doctor in Paralakhemundi at that time. My sister was ill. My mother was staying with my maternal grandparents in a rented house in Cuttack. My sister was looked after by my father's friends, who were doctors in Cuttack. Father had sent this letter which expressed his desperate longings for my mother. I knew he had stayed with his eldest uncle, Gopal Praharaj for two years when he was a high-school student. I had heard that father could sing *Gita Govindam* beautifully in a mellifluous voice. He was not only a good student but also acted well in plays. I was told that he was a fun-loving man.

I could easily see that these qualities were reflected in the letter. Very little of the letter I could understand though. I wondered how much my naïve mother must have made of it. Perhaps my mother took pride in one thing—she was a beautiful woman, and my father had married her against opposition. However, since I came of age, I had seen her face perpetually wearing an expression of sadness. I never realised how beautiful she was. Once, when I was working at Ravenshaw College, two of my senior colleagues came to visit me. Mother was staying with me. She must have been fifty-five or fifty-six then. The next day when we met in college, they praised her beauty profusely. They said, “We saw Pratibha’s mother. How beautiful she is! One rarely comes across such beauty.” Those two were revered Shanti Mishra and Sakuntala Mohanty (At different times, I worked under them when they became principals).

Why, I never noticed that my mother was so very beautiful! No one ever told me so. Then did she lack in any virtue? What made my father so callously grow away from her? Mother was of good moral character, a simple-hearted woman. Father was a learned and fun-loving man. He had married mother and walked a few steps with her in the journey of life. Why did he not remain by her side all her life? Not only did he grow indifferent to her, he did not even bother about his three children living in the village. He started living in Koraput. Our relationship was confined to receiving some money from him every month and occasionally one or two letters. He came to visit us once in three, four years.

Mother had convinced herself that father lay under the spell of black magic, which kept him away from her. Father had told her that once he crossed Vizianagaram station, he would forget that we existed. I never shared her belief that it was all due to some black magic. I had heard that our maternal grandfather had lost everything through the machination of evil spirits. The concept of black magic cannot be proved easily. If its absence cannot be proved, why should not it be regarded as present?

I had read the letter that day; I also read it a few times afterwards. Father had addressed Ma as “Hrudayeswari” (Goddess of my Heart) and had likened their relationship to that which existed between the moon and the water lily. Why did he then sever his ties with Ma? Who came between them?

I now think how foolish I was! Should I not have preserved that love letter? Did I know that the letter would remain painted in the walls of my memory, and I would recall it after a passage of fifty years? Reading another’s love letter was a forbidden act, and in this instance, a letter exchanged between my parents!

Since that tender age, I developed a natural mistrust and hatred towards men. Their feelings seemed fleeting and transient to me. Unfaithfulness seemed to be ingrained in their character. I had promised to myself that I would never trust a man nor would I ever get close to any man. And yet, I felt drawn towards a young man in my adolescence. His love took me unawares. Perhaps women are destined to be betrayed! In history as well as in scriptures, such examples abound. I had expressed this thought in one of my poems—*Man, he may be a god or human or a demon, I am fated to suffer in his hands*. How I was charmed by the way my father had addressed my mother! He seemed to have meant what he said.

Later in life, I learnt many more forms of address, terms of endearment and the roles tethered to them. When I mull over these terms, I get carried away. I also experience pain and a sense of hopelessness. By the time I write this, I have passed the phase of pain and joy and moved beyond them. I have understood that all these are actually tricks to capture a woman’s heart. “My life”,



“Dearest”, “Beloved”, “My Treasure”, “Princess of my Heart”, “My goddess”, “My goddess Saraswati”, “My golden doll”, “My moon”—all these terms embody a sense of temporariness. There is no sense of permanence attached to them. These terms are inspired by transient feelings.

In my old age, I am not sure if my judgement of men is correct! May be, men do not use such words under the spell of temporary feelings. Perhaps they have some expectations that remain unfulfilled, which lead to their disenchantment. And so they leave the object of their love and move away from the women they love. Who knows, they might be right.

In my case, I ask myself if I am some “animal” with whom one cannot live forever! Actually, I am not an “animal”; I am a sensitive woman. I guard my self-respect; I retain my pride, my likes and dislikes. My fault is that I am not shrewd. I never understand how to say things which would flatter another person. When I know which is “good” and which is “bad”, how would I agree blindly with another person just to please him? In the hope of some worldly gain? No, I have never been able to do so, I can never do so.

A friend of mine says—“You know, the happy couples you come across are happy because the wives agree with their husbands even if they call a parrot a crow in order to save their marriage.” She is surely a bit of a rebel. I cannot agree with her entirely. Ninety percent of couples might be like this; the remaining ten percent might be different and their relationships, based on affection and mutual respect. Well, who knows, this could just be my imagination!

Perhaps no love exists between married couples, but mutual dependence, social obligation, lust, which the poor couples regard as “love” and feel contended. In reality, this is justified. Love is a sort of madness. It vanishes very soon though it affects one intensely. However, even when the intensity ebbs, at least, sympathy and understanding between couples should not disappear.

**(Saisabarū sansar, pp. 117-121)**



**PROFESSIONALS**

**Bina Dei**

**Radha Devi**

## Bina Dei (1904-2003)

Bina Dei was born in 1904 in Bagalgada, Odisha. Her father, Kshetra Mohan Ray was a doctor. Bina Dei along with her sister Jyotsna Dei had jointly topped the matriculation examination as private students from Patna University in 1924. Bina Dei completed MBBS at Lady Hardinge, New Delhi in 1933. She acquired super specialty, with a scholarship from the Government of India, in Maternity, Child welfare and Family Planning in England. Her first job was at the Dufferin Hospital in Champaran, Bihar. In 1938, she joined the Cuttack Medical School as a lady assistant surgeon. She also served as the Superintendent of Medical Aid to Women and Children of Odisha and travelled across the state to inspect women and child care centres.

Her autobiography, *Akinchanara jeevan smriti* (Autobiography of a Nobody) was published in 2001. The many facets of her character are clearly displayed here: her passion for learning, her impatience with senior doctors, her desire to look after her brother's children and her religious inclinations. Her determination to pursue higher studies triggered a series of debates and controversies at her home till she threatened to commit suicide if she was not allowed to study.

Written at the request of her friends and well-wishers, her autobiography presents a coherent, fascinating narrative. The excerpt included here is of central importance to an understanding of Bina Dei's life and times, and the societal attitude to girls' education prevailing during that time. Even though she belonged to

an affluent, educated family, she had to face considerable resistance and overcome it through her passion for learning and determination in order to assert her independence.

### **Animals in a Zoo**

Our studies were interrupted for five years during the interval between my father completing his medical studies and his joining as a doctor in the army. We resumed our studies after this. I was about fifteen at the time. Sangram was eight. Father taught us English. We would memorise passages in English from books and repeat them before him. We would enact short skits in front of our parents. Father advised us to communicate in English at home.

He would say—"I would put a cross mark after your names in a notebook each time any of you spoke in Odia. At the end of the month, the number of cross marks would be counted. One who earned the least number of cross marks would receive a prize."

An elocution competition was held once in a week in our house and one who stood first in it received a prize. One who fared well in essay-writing received a prize, too. We had memorised Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*. We also read books such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Folk Tales of Bengal*. My father's pronunciation of English was excellent; he had picked up a good accent while working with the sahibs. He taught us how to pronounce English words correctly.

Nearly two years passed this way. In the mean time, father got transferred to different places such as Meerut, Karachi, Hyderabad and the North-western part of India. We lived in each of these places for about seven, eight months. At last, he received an order from his office to go to the borders. By then, the First World War had come to an end, but many soldiers had been wounded in the war and admitted to the hospital to which my father was transferred. As all these places lay close to the battlefield, employees were not allowed to keep their families with them. We had to come back to Odisha and father went to render his service in the field.

He wrote a letter to my maternal uncle, who served in the

Sakshigopal temple. He came and took us with him to Sakshigopal. I started crying fearing that my studies would come to an end.

My maternal uncle said—“Venu Gopal Acharya, a Tamil, teaches at the Bakul Bana Vidyalaya. He lives with his two sisters—one is a widow, the other has been deserted by her husband—and his wife. These three women don’t observe purdah. He teaches his sisters at home. He would teach you, too.”

We came and stayed at the dak bungalow of the Sakshigopal temple administration. At that time, this dak bungalow was the only concrete house in the whole town. It was surrounded by a large garden with a variety of flowers in bloom. Huge mango, jack-fruit and champak trees grew in its premises. There was a huge masonry well in front of the house. There was also a pond on the premises.

At the Bakul Bana Vidyalaya, pupils sat and studied in the shade of trees. The famous five teachers of this forest school—Pundit Nilakantha Das, Achariya Harihara Das, Pundit Godavarish Mishra, Pundit Krupasindhu Mishra and Pundit Gopabandhu Das—were known as *panchasakha*, five associates. All of them were freedom fighters. Gopabandhu Das had to travel outside Odisha often on work relating to National Congress. The other four teachers stayed and taught at the school.

My father knew the *panchasakha* very well. They used to ask after our well-being. Once, Sangram went down with typhoid. Pundit Nilakantha Das nursed him day and night till he fully recovered. The Tamil teacher lived at the school with his sisters—Bhagirathi (aged thirty) and Bisalakshi (aged twenty) and his wife, Sankari. Sankari and Bhagirathi did the household chores; Bisalakshi devoted her time to studies. The Tamil teacher had a son called Karasingh (Tambi). Gopabandhu Das’s son, Ashok—he must have been seven or eight—also stayed with them.

At Sakshigopal, whenever we asked our uncle why he did not take us to Venu Gopal Acharya, he would always avoid the question. One day, I overheard him telling my mother—“His wife and sisters

don't observe purdah. That's why I don't want to associate ourselves with them." Mother told us of this and we felt angry. We also spent some days in purdah. We would wake up at dawn and go to take bath in the pond accompanied by our maidservant, Puni. On the banks of the pond, one day, we met Bisalakshi. She could speak a little English. She got along with us well and invited us to her house, which lay behind the temple. One day, after finishing our bath, we went to her house.

We got to know Venu Gopal Acharya. He became very happy when he found that we could speak English. We requested him to teach us and he readily agreed and asked us to come to his residence. It was eight at night by the time we came back home, so uncle was very angry. Mother also expressed her displeasure. Women were not allowed to go out in day time without purdah. When we announced our decision to be taught by Venu Gopal at his house, mother and uncle decided that we would be escorted by our maidservant, Puni to his house in the evening and study till eight or nine o' clock there. We informed Venu Gopal Acharya of this. He laughed and said—"Human beings engage in evil deeds in the dark, they usually don't dare doing evil in daylight. How could your uncle advise you to come here in the evening?"

Our uncle and mother realised the truth in what he said. They decided that we would go to his house in day time. A letter was sent to father saying that Venu Gopal had given his consent to teach us. He felt happy and wrote him a letter—"I'm willing to offer you fifty rupees every month as your tuition fees." To this, Acharya answered—"I'm a detached, selfless man. I don't take money in exchange of my service."

About ten months after I started studying there, a problem relating to a piece of land owned by my mother surfaced. Mother had to go to Niali to sort out this problem. She also took us along with her. At Niali, there was no opportunity to continue our studies. I cried most of the time as no arrangements could be made regarding our studies. Jyotsna remained indifferent in this matter. I gave up

hope and tried to commit suicide. Mother informed my father of this in a letter. I even contemplated embracing Christianity in order to continue my studies.

I wrote a letter to Miss Banks, the principal of Ravenshaw Women's College—"I want to study. Please make some arrangements for me." I also wrote a letter to Mahatma Gandhi—"My family members are against women's education; they are not willing to give me an education. Please make some arrangements for me. I may go and live in the Andaman island, but I want to study." I gave this letter to someone to drop in a post-box, but he passed it to my mother and she sent it to father. He replied that I and Jyotsna should be sent to my paternal uncle's house at Cuttack. He had also written to uncle regarding this matter.

Mother took us to uncle's house and asked him to get us enrolled at the girls' high school at Cuttack. My aunt disliked this idea and said—"It's a matter of shame. How could they study like the boys do?" I ignored her words and kept quiet.

Now and then, uncle would argue against women's education—"Women lose their character if they study." I would disagree with him and say—"What do you mean? No one can spoil one who wants to be good." He would say—"Everyone flows with the current. No one remains unpolluted." I would shoot back—"Does the syllabus make losing one's character compulsory?" Then he would not say anything. Another day, he would argue—"If you study, no one would marry you." I said fearlessly—"I would never marry a man who thought of education as a disqualification for women; besides, I have no desire to get married." On another occasion, he argued—"Do you think you would bring about a revolution in Odisha by studying? Your father might have gone abroad, but he's no leader. The leader of Odisha is Gokulananda Choudhury. Odisha will do what he says. Who cares for your views? You would only become a laughing-stock."

"It isn't my intention to bring change in Odisha. I want to change myself. I want to be happy looking at the beautiful sights

of the world. It would be nice if someone else changed society,” I would reply.

On another occasion, he said—“Krutibasa Samantaray is a professor at Ravenshaw College. He has earned double master’s degrees; he’s a learned man. Everyone follows his advice. If someone is in trouble, they go to him to seek his advice. I went to him yesterday. I asked him, ‘What are your views on women’s education?’ He said—‘Women should learn the alphabet in their mother tongue, which would enable them to read and understand scriptures and write letters. They may know a little more which would enable them to keep accounts of their household. If they knew a little English, they could write addresses on the letters to be posted, and they could read and understand a telegram.’ You already possess that much knowledge. Why do you want to study more?”

“Krutibasa Samantaray is a learned man and people follow his advice. But I don’t think I need his advice.”

To this Uncle would not say anything in reply nor did he ever show any interest in enrolling us at the girls’ high school. Two months passed in this manner. So I wrote a letter to my father—“Uncle and aunt don’t want us to study. If you don’t make any other arrangements, I would go my own way.”

Father sent a telegram to uncle instructing him to enroll us at the Girls’ High School; he also sent the money required for our admission. So he got us enrolled at the Ravenshaw Girls’ High School. While we were studying there, Sarala Devi, a woman leader, came to know about us from some sources. One day, she came to my uncle’s house and said to my aunt—“I’ll take Bina with me. I’ll bring her back in the evening.”

Sarala Devi had formed a youth association at her residence. She was its president. Annada Sankar Ray, Nabakrushna Choudhury, Baikuntha Patnaik, Balamukunda Nayak—all were students then. The youth association was called “Sabuja Sangha”. They also



published a magazine. I could not open up to them out of shyness and sat quietly. They gossiped freely and made fun of each other. Sarala Devi would tease me—“You’re a humourless wooden block.”

When I came back home in the evening, uncle harshly told me off. He said—“There were so many people in front of the court and you walked past them. Young men frequent Sarala Devi’s house. You had a good time with them. Don’t ever step out of the house without my permission.”

In the mean time, an untoward incident happened in his house; when my father came to know about it, he thought that it was no longer safe for us to stay there. He sent a telegram to uncle and said—“Send Bina and Jyotsna to our village soon.” He also sent a telegram to mother. She came and took us with her to village. My studies came to an end. After nearly a month, father came on leave; he visited Cuttack before he came to village. He said to me—“I’ve discussed the matter with Bira and we’ve taken a decision. He’s found a tutor, who will come and teach you at our village home.”

I was not happy with this arrangement. I had a feeling that a tutor who came to teach one at home could never be a good teacher. Still, half a loaf was better than a piece of bread. I waited for the tutor. As the teacher did not come even after many days passed, I wrote to my uncle. He replied—“He’s appearing for an examination. After his examination is over, he’d go there.”

I thought to myself—what would one, who was himself appearing for an examination, teach us? But there was no option but to wait for him. Still, he did not arrive; I wrote to uncle again and received the following reply—“He’s preparing for the supplementary examination. He’d be available after the examination.”

After reading the letter, I grew worried and wept. I told myself—I can see clearly what kind of a teacher would come and how he would teach us. Have teachers become so rare? Was it so difficult to find a good teacher? At this time, Sundar bhai (my

father's eldest brother's son, Brajasundar Routray; later, he adopted the surname, "Pattnaik") told me—"Can't you see, Bina? I've overheard two uncles discussing this matter. They've decided to delay your studies as long as possible and, in the mean time, fix a groom for you and give you away in marriage. Your passion for studies would naturally die."

I felt utterly desolate and thought I had no other way but to end my life. I had attempted suicide a number of times but without success. Mother wrote to my father anxiously—"Bina is uncontrollable. One day, I would have to commit suicide on account of her. Please find a way out soon."

Father sent a telegram to her—"Go and take a rented house in Cuttack. Stay there with Bina, Jyotsna, my elder brother's widow, and our old servant, Balia. Sangram will also stay with you. The tutor, who is teaching Sangram, will also teach Bina and Jyotsna."

At last, this was what happened. We stayed in a rented house in Cuttack. Gopinath Behera taught us and Sangram. After some days, we learnt that father would come to Cuttack on leave. I and Jyotsna pleaded to go to the railway station to receive our father.

Our teacher said—"The railway station is crowded with men, you shouldn't go there."

As we insisted, a horse carriage was arranged; two people held a bed-sheet as a screen when we entered the carriage. All the windows of the carriage were closed. We reached the station, but were not allowed to go to the platform. Mother went to the platform with the kids. We two sisters sat inside the carriage. Father came and asked—"You didn't go to the platform. Why did you come to the station then?"

"Our teacher didn't allow us," we said.

"Such a silly teacher!"

After a few days, my father got transferred from the Middle-East and was posted in India. He took us with him and we stayed in

Karachi. Shortly afterwards, he resigned military service and joined the Odisha government service. We also came back with him.

On our way back from Karachi, he took us on a pilgrimage. We went to Haridwar. We visited the ashram of Swami Shivananda and many other places of pilgrimages. We bathed in the Ganges. The natural beauty of Haridwar left me mesmerised. I was charmed by the sight of trees on the high mountains. It seemed as though they were touching the heavens. When they swayed in the wind, it appeared as though they were offering prayers at the feet of the almighty. I wished if I had grown as a tree here. I felt as if I received the touch of god when the cold breeze caressed me. I was so enchanted I wished I could spend all my life here.

In the morning, we went to take a dip in the Ganges. The rock-bottom which lay almost a foot and half below could be seen through the crystal clear water. The river flowed on singing a soothing song. Fishing was not allowed here. The moment one put one's legs into the water, fishes would swirl around them fearlessly. The pilgrims would buy fish-feed and threw it into the water. We finished taking bath in the Ganges and had our food at the math. We spent two days there. Father offered *shradha* to his deceased parents at the Ganges. We also took a dip in the Ganges at Mathura, Vrindavan, Kashi, and Triveni, the holy confluence of Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati in Allahabad.

It was evening by the time we reached Vrindavan. We saw tulsi bushes growing on both sides of the railway track. I thought maybe for this reason the place was called Vrindavan. We went to the temple there. We found a group of children dancing in joy and singing on the temple premises. The sight filled my heart with joy. I bought an image of Radha and Krishna made of black stone. I always worshipped this image. When I went to study medicine, my mother offered worship to it. We ate different varieties of sweets made from milk in Vrindavan. We also went to Mathura and Kashi. As we could not get a steamer, we could not go to Ayodhya.

We went to the hut of a holy man in Vrindavan. The room

was fairly large, but its entrance was narrow. We had to stoop at the door to go inside. The holy man was a Bengali. He was fat and had a very fair complexion. Seated on a mattress in the lotus posture, he was composing a poem on the childhood of Sri Krishna in a note book spread on a desk before him. We fell at his feet to pay our respects and then sat near him. He read and explained to us the meaning of the poem he was writing; tears flowed from his eyes as he read it aloud to us. We paid our obeisance to him again before we took leave of him. He laid his sack containing his beads on our heads by way of blessing us and chanted:

*Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare  
Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare.*

He told us to repeat this mantra all the time. Since then, I have been repeating this all my life. Jyotsna also did the same till the end of her life. At the time, we were the six children of our parents: five daughters and one son. My mother was pregnant at that time with her seventh child. We also visited Bodh Gaya. Lord Buddha had attained enlightenment after meditating under a huge peepul tree here. At Bodh Gaya, father offered *shradha* to his parents. At last, we came to Puri and had a glimpse of Sri Jagannath. Again, father offered *shradha* to his parents in Puri.

After father came back to Odisha, he joined as a teacher at the Cuttack Medical School. He rented a large house in Dagarapada in Cuttack. We all went to live there.

Gopal Chandra Mohanty, a cousin of my mother, was a schoolteacher. He was Radhashyam Mohanty (an orthopaedic)'s father. One day, he came to visit us. Mother introduced him to us—"He's Gopal uncle. He's come to meet you." We were reading in our study room. We drew our veil over our head. We offered him a chair after greeting him with folded hands.

Mother went to the kitchen to make tea for him.

Gopal uncle looked at me and said, "I hear you are *studying*." (He put emphasis on the word "studying")

“Yes.” I said.

“Why do you study?”

“To acquire knowledge.”

“What do you study?”

“We’re preparing to sit for the matriculation examination this year.”

We had a small library in our study room. There were a lot of books on the shelves: twelve volumes of the *Book of Knowledge*, twelve volumes of *Masterpieces of World’s Best Writers*, *Sherlock Holmes*, Lamb’s *Tales of Shakespeare*, *Robinson Crusoe* and many other books in English. We also had books such as Ramakrishna Paramahansa’s *Kathamrita*, Swami Vivekananda’s works, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagabata* and many books in Odia and Bangla. He pulled out an English novel from the shelf at random, opened it in the middle, and handed it to me.

“Now read this,” he asked me.

When he found I could read out the page fluently, he asked me in English: “Did you attend an English-medium School?”

“No, sir, we never went to any English medium school. We observe strict purdah.”

“Then who taught you?”

“Our father taught us.”

“Is your mother your biological mother or step-mother?”

“No, sir, thank God, she’s our own mother.”

“Have you written any essay in English? Please show it to me.”

We had visited many places of pilgrimage, but the enchanting beauty of Haridwar had touched my soul and had filled my heart with ecstatic joy. I had written an essay in English based on that experience. He asked me to read out this essay to him; so I read it aloud.

“Have you written anything in Odia?”

Mother sang to us from the *Ramayana* every day after we finished eating our midday meal. I liked the episode of the *agnipariksha* where Sita was asked to prove her chastity in an ordeal of fire. I had written a poem on this subject. In my poem, Sita asked Rama if he was right in subjugating her to an ordeal of fire. I had never read about Sita questioning Rama in any version of the *Ramayana*. I had interpreted the episode in my own way. Gopal uncle stroked my head after I read out the poem to him. He patted my back, saying, “Bravo, Daughter. Bravo.”

“Sister! Sister!” He called out to my mother. She came in holding a plate of snacks for him.

Gopal uncle told my mother—“Sister, you must provide education to this daughter. Let no obstacle deter you. If this girl doesn’t receive an education, no one has the right to receive it. I’ve assessed her intelligence, her wisdom and her character. I’ve heard outsiders say that you’re their step-mother. You want to educate them as you don’t want to give them dowry at the time of their marriage. They said that the girls had no intelligence, that they were only showing off. I now realise all these are rumours spread by evil-minded people.”

“You took a test of my eldest daughter; please ask some questions to my younger daughter.” Mother requested him.

“One can guess whether the rice is boiled or not by pressing only one grain from a pot.”

Mother had brought snacks for him but the gentleman said—“What would I eat? I’m so happy, I feel already full.”

“Mother took the trouble to prepare the snacks for you; she would feel sad if you didn’t have anything.” I said.

“All right, then,” said he and had the snacks and left.

On another occasion, Lakshminarayan Sahoo came to meet us when he heard that we were studying. He told us about women’s

education and many other things. He supported education for women and encouraged us. However, the majority continued to oppose the idea of girls receiving an education.

When we came back to Cuttack, Jayakrushna Dash was appointed to teach us at home. He was a renowned teacher at Cuttack Victoria High School. He was a friend of my father. In a very short time, his relationship with our family grew very close.

The whole of Cuttack was abuzz with the news that Kshetra Mohan Ray's two daughters were studying! Giving women an education was still a taboo. People passed hostile remarks at our expense. Many of them said—"Kshetra Mohan Ray's wife is actually the step-mother of the two girls. She doesn't want to give them in marriage. Providing them an education is just a pretext." Ladies visited our house accompanied by their illiterate daughters. They would argue against women's education. Their daughters would look at us amusedly as though we were animals in a zoo!

**(Akinchanara jeevan smruti, pp. 45-59)**



## Radha Devi (1930 – 2008)

Radha Devi was born on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1930 in Nilagiri, Balasore. Her father, Nilamani Jena worked in the police department under the king of Nilagiri. Radha Devi studied at Balasore Mission School, Fakir Mohan College before she got an admission at SCB Medical College, Cuttack in 1950. She practised at different clinics in Kolkata before starting her clinic, Seva Sadan at Motiganj, Balasore in 1959.

Radha Devi was married to Shyamsundar Mohapatra, a political leader, in 1954 against the wishes of her family as it was an inter caste marriage. Shyamsundar Mohapatra (1929-2006) hailed from a Brahmin, landlord family. He was popular as a student leader and went on to become a Member of Lok Sabha from 1971 to 1977 and a Member of Rajya Sabha from 1980 to 1986. He also served as the General Secretary of All India Congress Committee.

Radha Devi is remembered not only as a renowned doctor but as a dedicated social worker in Odisha. She was involved with a number of social organisations that worked for the uplift of the poor and the marginalised in the state. In 1960, she became the secretary of the Balasore Nari Sangha, which worked for improving the lives of rural women.

In 1961, Radha Devi started editing *Juganari*, a monthly magazine for women, which continued till 1971 and published writings by Odia women writers. In 1989, she resumed its publication after renaming it as *Jugashree Juganari*. She remained its editor till she breathed her last on 31 May 2008.



In her memoir, *Mo jeevan mo samaya* published in 2007, she writes about her childhood days, her growing up in a garjat area, and her days as a medical student. She recalls her early days of practising as a doctor in Kolkata, visiting foreign countries as a delegate at medical conferences and her family life. The past of Balasore come to life as she records significant socio-political events and people in her recollection.

### **My Time at Balasore Mission Girls' School**

The universities for Bihar and Odisha became separate in 1945. I was enrolled at Balasore Mission Girls' High School that year. There were a lot of heated arguments at home before my enrollment there. My grandfather and father wanted me to get married. They also started searching for a groom. A few strangers came to see me for that purpose. I had no other way but to request Mayadhar Das, our head master at Middle English School, to speak to my father on my behalf and dissuade him from marrying me off. He told my father – “Look, she's got a scholarship, she's talented. She'll make you proud, if you give her a chance.”

At that time, though there were a number of schools in Balasore, only Balasore Girls' High School had a hostel for girls. Though it was full of Christian girls, a few Hindu girls stayed there, too. I was put up there after a discussion with its authority. I remember the day I first went to that school. My father had accompanied me. We were accompanied by Sani uncle, who drove the Diljan bus that plied between Nilagiri and Balasore, and its conductor, John, who had a distinct moustache. A porter had walked all the way down from Nilagiri carrying some utilities and clothes in a tin trunk to the hostel. He had taken the road that ran parallel to the railway tracks till Balasore station. The distance was two kosa less by that route. I also took this road, accompanied by a porter, to the hostel a number of times whenever I did not get a seat in the Diljan bus.

I was enrolled in grade eight in 1945. It was difficult for girls hailing from a garjat area like Nilagiri to get a chance to study.

Most middle class parents thought of marrying their daughters off by the time they were twelve or thirteen. I remember none of my minor girl schoolmates at village could study further. My friend, Yamini put a full stop to her study after grade sixth. At the Mission School, girls lived in a huge two storied hostel building with a compound wall. It was surrounded by big trees. The ground floor had the matron's residence and the hostel kitchen. When I was enrolled, the few Hindu girls at the hostel included Sudhira Sinha from Baudpur, Bhadrak; Shanti Sabat, the daughter of renowned musician Manmohan Sabat, and Uttara from Karanjia. The first floor had four large dormitories. Downstairs, there was a large hall and a few rooms. After six months of my stay at the hostel, Gangadhar Senapati, Shergod landlord, enrolled his eldest daughter, Premamayee, second daughter Swarna, and youngest daughter Nikunja at Mission school. We all stayed at the hostel. I had gone to Gangadhar Senapati's house a number of times and tried to persuade him to enroll his daughters at our school.

We would lay a mattress in the shade of mango and jamun trees and prepare for examination. During our examination the intoxicating fragrance of mango blossoms filled the air. There was a pond in the hostel premise. There was a boundary wall to the west side, but the boundary on the north side stretched far. There was a well at a distance. Girls brought water for drinking and cooking from this well. Every girl of the hostel had to bring water from the well routinely. We would gaze at the crowd and shops at a distant standing over the wall bracing of the well.

At that time, we had to pay thirteen rupees per month as hostel fees. I received ten rupees as scholarship. My father sent his due three rupees, but rather irregularly. Miss Pawars was our hostel superintendent as well as the principal of the school. She was tall and fair; she had a round face and bob hair. She wore gowns and always walked briskly in high hills. She took keen interest in every student and spoke to them to learn about their difficulties. The names and addresses of all hostellers were written in her register. She would invite every student for dinner on their birthdays and

gift them pencil, ribbon and notebooks. She gave eight annas to each student as pocket money every Saturday. If any guardian did not send money for this purpose, she would give them the money from her own pocket.

I remember our matron, Kiran Bedi. We were given dinner at five in the evening – watery dal, hot mixed curry with rice were served to us. We would offer our prayers before we had our food. After we had had our food, we would study till eight o’ clock. At eight o’ clock, when we heard the distinct sound of our matron’s shoes on the corridor, we would switch off our lights and go to sleep. We had another assistant matron at the hostel; she always wore white clothes and spoke softly. She would ask after our health and difficulties if any. I remember Dr. Brahma Mohan Das. He was around six feet tall, strong and stout. He would do a check-up of all the students once every month. If anyone had any illness, Mission incurred the expenditure for their treatment.

A group was formed to read the *Bible* and learn about Christianity. Every Wednesday, the members of the group went to the Protestant church near the court. Every Sunday, Christian girls went to the Protestant church to attend the prayer assembly. Anyone who read the *Bible* and secured good marks in the test on *Bible* got books as prize.

Our head mistress was Sarojini Dash. She was thin and was about four feet eleven inch height. Her wise eyes always remained alert under her glasses. She was very calm but strict. She taught us English. Miss Dey was physically challenged, she limped while walking. She had fair complexion, round face, wide eye brows and an attractive personality. She taught us history. Miss Chakku from Kerala was an expert in mathematics. She made her bun in a distinct style, wore sari and high hills. When she left for Kerala, Mr. Mananka took our mathematics class. Pundit Srinivas Mishra taught us Sanskrit. Later in life, he grew insane; he was put in the mental asylum of a prison. Ever a smiling man, he was learned in Sanskrit. Music was taught at our school. Manmohan Sabat, the

maestro, taught us music. Later, Sukumar Sahu taught us music. Bindu didi was our sports teacher. She also taught us geography. Memory of many other teachers has faded.

I remember my classmates. Shanti Sabat was the daughter of Sujata Roy, Kathak dancer and Manmohan Sabat, our school musician. She was slim but had a long face and dense dark curly hair. She was very charming. She performed Kathak dance at the durbar of Nilagiri, Mayurbhanj palaces and received shawls and money. She looked like a beautiful doll. This popular dancer married a scientist and lived in Cuttack. Her conjugal life was unhappy. Her husband went to USA for a year. Shanti grew close to another man. Later, I learnt about her committing suicide from newspapers.

Mission Girls' High School was the only school meant for girls in Balasore district. Hence girls from well to do families of Balasore, particularly girls from Bengali families came to study at our school. The number of Bengali girls was very high. Shanti, daughter of Radhaprasanna babu, who was a landlord, came by a horse cart. Before the school commenced for the day, all students would stand in a row. When the bell rang, they would go to the prayer hall. To maintain discipline, Mrs Bibha Sarkar, a graduate from Bethune College in those days, Asha Biswas and Nargis Bodhan supervised us. I fondly remember how Bibha Sarkar arranged my sari pleats neatly with a safety pin on a number of occasions. All these memories remain fresh and vibrant. Age and time could not wither them.

Rules at our school were very strict. We were not allowed to roam around the bazaar or outside the school. On Wednesday evenings, the Bible group organised meetings to discuss the Bible. I was the monitor of the Bible Group. Those days, the protestant church at Balasore stood at the opposite of the law court. It stands there even today. On Charismas and New Year days and other special occasions, prayer assemblies took place at the church. When a teacher or a student of our school died, a prayer assembly in their honour was organised at the church. We would go to the church in

a line. The prayer hall was huge; there was an oil painting of Jesus Christ looming large from the wall. There were also metal statues. Then the altar on which the pastor read out the Bible. Then there were rows of desks and benches. Christian of all ages came here and prayed for hours on end. Christian girls from our hostel came to attend the Sunday prayer assembly. If the church bell rang on any other day than Sunday, we assumed that someone had died. The number of times the bell rang corresponded to the age of the deceased.

Those days, Roman Catholic Church, which stood in the middle of the town, was functioning properly. After fifty years, there has been great change over the way it functions. The Roman Catholic Church has built a number of small churches and prayer halls in rural Balasore. As there is a flow of money from the Vatican and Christian countries, missionary work has grown in the area. They carry out conversion and provide aid to the poor for education. On the sprawling campus of Roman Catholic Church, there is the St. Vincent Convent School, a prayer hall and a beautiful church building. There are classes from nursery till tenth grade at the convent school. On the other hand, the two mission high schools are now in a bad state. Their teachers are not getting regular salaries. Many people bought land from the Mission Girls' High School and started running shops and all.

When I was a student, two students' groups had been founded – Students' Federation and Students' Union. Once ten students from our school participated in a speech competition organised by the Students' Federation. I came first in that competition. On behalf of the Students' Federation, Shyamsundar Mohapatra, who was a student at Fakir Mohan College, Jadav Patnaik and another student had come to offer the prize. Our Sanskrit teacher, Srinivas Mishra had handed over the prize to our head mistress, Sarojini Dash. I remember the title of a book – *Dharama jhia* (The Adopted Daughter). It was based on the alleged real life story of an aged intellectual and his adopted daughter at that time. This book had created a sensation all over Odisha.

Shyamsundar Mohapatra, who had come to give the book, became my husband in due course. That was the second time I saw him. My heart skipped a beat when I saw him. When I was a student at the Nilagiri Minor School, Shyam babu had gone there once. He had dense dark curly hair, sharp nose, long face. I gazed adoringly at this handsome, young man.

I passed matriculation in 1948 with first division. Again a lot of debates ensued at home regarding my higher study. A lot of marriage proposal came for me. I was hell bent that I would study further. My father was working in the police department under the king of Nilagiri. After the annexation of garjat areas, he was transferred to Balasore. My father had a colleague, Lakshminarayan Das, who had also worked at the police department and lived in Bhoi sahi after his retirement. We took on rent a room at his place. I stayed there to study further. I was enrolled in intermediate science class at Fakir Mohan College.

**(Mo jeevan mo samaya, pp. 64 -70)**



## **CHRONICLERS**

**Snehalata Mohapatra**

**Durgabati Tripathy**

**Mandakini Das**

**Rama Devi**

**Sanghamitra Mishra**

## Snehalata Mohapatra (1932-2013)

Snehalata Mohapatra was born in 1932 in Gajaraipur, Odisha. She went to a one-room lower primary village school, where her father, Ramachandra Acharya was a teacher. She studied up to class three, and then got married at the age of eleven. She became a mother at the age of sixteen and subsequently gave birth to twelve children out of which two died in infancy. Her husband, Bauribandhu Mohapatra was a government servant, who retired as a senior administrative officer under Government of Odisha.

Her brief account *Mo piladina* (My Childhood) was serialised in *Sikha*, a bi-monthly brought out by Sikshasandhan, before it was published in 2008 in the form of a slim book which also carried her husband's reminiscences. She recounts her care-free childhood and the games she played with her friends in the following excerpt. The excerpt also shows how teachers imparted education to pupils of different grades in a one-room school. It describes how they were initiated into learning the alphabet, which is now a lost tradition, through drawing three circles on a slate or on the ground with a piece of chalk.

### Childhood and Education

My childhood and education both came to an end at one stroke. When I was only eleven, I was married off. Seven, eight months prior to my wedding, I had stopped going to school. By then I had passed class three at our village school, where my father was the headmaster. After completing class three, I remained at home and did a lot more household chores than before. I had so much



work to do at home; how could I find the time to roam around the village? So to say, my childhood came to an end.

There was a lower primary school in our village; an upper primary school and a minor school were at Mundala. Upper primary schools had classes up to class four or five; minor schools had classes up to class six and seven. After passing out of the latter one attended high schools. I had never heard of any girl of our village or neighbouring villages attending a high school. Girls usually did not go to school and, if ever they got a chance to do so, they went to lower primary schools or at most to upper primary schools.

When I was ten, I completed class three. When I was six years old, I started going to school. A majority of the pupils, usually boys, started school when they were seven or eight. I remember when I was reading in class three, two boys—Natia and Bansia—were studying in my class. They must have been sixteen or seventeen by then. We used to mock at them, calling them “old monkeys”.

Lower primary schools had four classes; the nursery, class one, class two and class three. We always referred to our school as “UP school”, and by the time we reached class three, we congratulated ourselves, thinking—Ah! How learned we’ve become!

My father, Ramachandra Acharya was the headmaster of our school. Everyone in our village called him, “Master”; those who were older than him or his contemporaries called him, Ramamaster. When he had taken up this job, he was the only teacher in the school. By the time we reached class three, another teacher joined our school and hence, father became the headmaster. The second teacher was Gaji Nayak, who lived in the Nayak settlement that lay at one end of our village. Madhu master joined the school afterwards, another teacher from Mahira also joined him; but none of them ever taught us.

Our house stood in the middle of the village. Ours was a big village—its central part occupied a large area. Our house lay quite a distance away from the school. I strode to my school along with my

father. He was tall, his feet were large; when he took one step, I had to take four steps to match his stride. I almost had to run behind him all the way. Sometimes, those who were older than my father, would tell him off, “Ah, master, you’ll kill your daughter; you make her run all the way. Don’t you know, the distance is three *pas*, not a few *khojas*!”

Little children, studying in the nursery, came to school, carried in others’ arms. One pupil was so pampered that he came sitting on his servant’s shoulders. Other pupils teased him continually and he had to give up this habit.

On my way to school, I stopped only at one spot—at Gouranga babu’s shop. The school lay some distance away, on the right side stood Gopalajiu’s temple. A row of thatched shops stood just one jump away from the boundary wall of the temple. One of these shops belonged to Gouranga babu. He was short, fair-complexioned, and had a bulging stomach. In our entire village, his was a really big shop; no shop that big was even in villages nearby. Every day items for the shop came loaded on a boat from Cuttack along river Devi; those were carried by men from the river embankment at Erada. It seemed as if there was nothing that was not available at this shop! Everything—oil, salt, mustard, pulses, rice, roasted chickpeas, ground peanuts, sugar candy—was available here. During my childhood, the shops in our village did not sell chocolates. When we craved for sweets, we thought we were in heaven if we got a sugar candy.

My grandfather, Fakir Acharya, whom people fondly called Fakiracharya, would be sitting on the shop veranda, waiting for me in the morning. He was extremely fond of me; I also loved him dearly. My daily chores included boiling hot water for him and roasting two handfuls of flattened rice for him after I woke up in the morning. The day barber Hari did not turn up, another duty was added to the list of my chores. I would have to massage my grandfather’s back with oil. (Sometimes, if I had to do this for three, four days in a row, I would become very angry and express

my displeasure, calling him, “Ugly old man!” My grandfather would not react to this, but if my father ever heard me say this, he grew extremely angry.

When I approached the shop, I would cast a furtive glance at my grandfather. He would call aloud to the boy working at the shop, “Hey, Bandhua, here comes our daughter!” (He always called me “daughter” or “mother”. He never called me by my name.) That meant: Give some savoury in exchange of a paisa. Sometimes, I got roasted nuts (roasted on heated sand) or fried groundnuts (if stale, that tasted clammy), and at other times, a sugar candy. I received this from my grandfather every morning on my way to school; the old man never sat in the shop in the afternoon.

Our school ran in two shifts—the first shift lasted from morning till eleven and the afternoon shift was from two thirty till five—be it summer, rain or winter; only on Saturdays the school had one shift. On Sundays, it remained closed.

There was no wall clock at our school. To keep track of time, my father used to take a table clock from our house to school; he brought it back home every day. He would set the alarm in it; sometimes the buzz of alarm would startle the little children in the nursery. When the alarm went off, we knew that the school hours had come to an end. There was no brass bell in our school when we were students; later, we would hear the sound of the bell at the beginning and the end of each hour and also when the school closed for the day.

Our school building consisted of a large rectangular room. It had a thatched roof, mud walls, a door and two windows. Students of all the classes sat together in that one-room school, in four separate rows according to the classes they were in.

We were taught by one teacher up to class three. He managed the pupils of all the three classes. He would stand beside a row of students for some time, then he would move toward another row; here he would dictate something, and there he would teach

a different topic. There was a wooden chair meant for the teacher in the classroom, but most of the time he kept moving about the room. Whenever he sat down in his chair, pupils would not pay any attention to their lessons. When another teacher joined the school, two chairs were placed in the room near the same old table. The headmaster's things occupied a large portion of the table; only a small portion remained for the use of the junior teacher. We often saw those two arguing over something and also sharing paans, areca nuts and tobacco powder.

We began our lessons from the nursery class. Those who came from educated families—like me—had already learnt how to write “Brahma”, “Vishnu” and “Maheswar” at home. This meant one had to draw three circles on a slate with the help of a chalk over and over again. Some of us had also learnt a few letters of the Odia alphabet at home. Most of the pupils began learning lessons at school. In the nursery, pupils had to learn writing the letters of the Odia alphabet and counting from one to ten.

When we were in class one, we would learn to write simple words on slate, read from books, and count from one to hundred. In class two, we learnt compound words, read literature and memorised multiplication tables. In class three, everything else—memorising more multiplication tables, multiplication, division, more compound words, and literary texts. We were taught mathematics in the first hour and literature in the second.

The books we read by the time we had completed class three included *Madhu Baarnabodha*, *Chatasali patha* and a few other books. Whatever it was—be it arithmetic or literature—we never read aloud unless we were asked to by our teacher. When we read aloud, the whole school became unmanageable and too distracting for everyone.

Those who were slow learners invariably got beaten. In the morning pupils were thrashed by a cane, in the afternoon, the teachers boxed their ears or slapped them. In the morning, one was thrashed by a cane in case one did not solve an arithmetic sum

correctly. The cane hit the hands, legs, backs of the students hard. Pupils would jump about like monkeys in pain, rubbing their bodies desperately with their hands.

The practice of untouchability prevailed even in schools. Teachers would not hit an untouchable pupil with their hands; instead, they would throw the cane at them in such a manner that it would exactly hit their back and leave scars on them. The untouchable pupil would pick up the cane and place it before the teacher, who would again throw it at him. My father always kept the clothes he wore to school in a separate place at home. These were laid on a string that hung from the thatch. After he wore a set of clothes for two, three days, these would be sent to the washer man, and he would put on another set of clothes. Untouchable pupils sat on the veranda of the school. The teacher would stand at the threshold and inspect them or sometimes he would walk out of the classroom to teach them.

We took with us ten bundles of small bamboo sticks and one hundred tiny clay balls. These we used to learn addition and subtraction. Ten sticks of bamboo made one bundle. All the sticks were cut to the same size and were polished to blunt the sharp edges to keep our hands from being cut. We made balls out of mud and dried them in the sun. The bamboo sticks were coloured with ink or lac-dye or the juice of basella berries. Some pupils mixed coloured soil or forest soil in the clay before rolling them into balls. If the mud was not made sticky enough before making the balls, the balls cracked in no time.

When we went to school, we would carry cloth bags and palm-leaf mats in one hand and, in the other, a pouch filled with mud balls. The pouch had a handle, and when we walked, it swung in our hand. At school, pupils stole each others' balls and sticks. It was not easy to catch the thief, but in case the "thief" was caught, he got beaten by teachers and pupils.

We used slates and pieces of chalk for writing. The use of paper, pen and pencil was not known. Even during examinations,

we used to write on slates. During the tests, we would write on our slates the answer to one question and stack our slates on the teacher's table. The teacher would check our answers and then we would bring back our slates and write out the answer to the next question. The names of the students, who got promoted to the higher class, were declared before the school closed for the annual holidays. In every class, three, four students failed to make it to the next class. Sometimes, it took such students—pupils like Natia and Bainsia—two, three years to be promoted to the next class.

We girls, I and my friends, never got punished in class. I remember my friends—Saila, Khemi, Gunia, Baby, Baurani, and Bela—all girls. We girls were never beaten at school. At most, our palms would be caned lightly. Though we found it painful, the pain was not so excruciating to make us jump about like monkeys as the boys did. Once Baurani was beaten black and blue when we were in class two. Our teacher was dictating a few words to us. Those were not difficult words, very simple words, but he dictated the words rapidly. The test was meant to find out how speedily the pupils could write out the words. In the middle of dictating the words, the teacher said, “dhamana”. Then he went on to dictate other words. Baurani went on repeating the word “dhamana” on her slate. The teacher lashed her mercilessly. Baurani went home crying and complained to her father.

Her father came to our house. He asked father, “Teacher, why did you beat my daughter?”

He shot back, “Come to school and ask me about it there. I don't discuss school matters at home.” Baurani's father, Bihari Jena, quietly went back; he never came to school to complain about the incident.

We pupils, be it a boy or a girl, never went to school wearing stitched clothes such as blouses or trousers. The use of stitched clothes was not common at that time. Girls went to school wearing coarse hand-woven saris. These saris used to be six hands, seven hands, or eight hands in length. I began going to school wearing a six-hands-long sari, but by the time my studies came to end at

class three, I was wearing saris eight-hands-long. The boys went to school wearing *gamuchha*.

We had no time set apart for recess in our time table. We would seek the teacher's permission to go out to make water or attend the call of nature. When we felt bored or when our backs grew stiff sitting continuously for hours, we would seek the teacher's permission to go out on the pretext of going to pee. When three, four pupils sought his permission to go out to make water, the teacher would ask, "Ah! All of you felt this urge at the same time? Don't I know why you want to go together? Spit on the ground and come back before the spittle dries up."

In reality, we never had to spit. If we asked to go on "small call", we would go to the star fruit tree that stood at the edge of our school boundary in the hope of finding one or two ripe fruits that might have dropped from the tree. If we took permission to go for "nature's call", we would go far—to the premises of Radhamadhab temple that stood amid baula trees or enter the premises of Gopalajiu whose doors remained closed in the noon. We would go and stand on the wooden bridge over the river Gobari and watch the waters flow.

The boys too slipped away giving the excuse of making water; they were smarter and braver than us. When, by chance, the teacher dozed off, they would slink away from the classroom. In case they were caught while slipping back into the classroom, they would say that they had gone to answer the call of nature. This was not easy to do in presence of two teachers. But, on some days, both the teachers remained absent.

We girls would decorate our hands and nails with the paste of ground balsam leaves and flowers. We would make a paste out of red balsam flowers mixing it with ground potato leaves, a little arum, a few drops of grapefruit juice and a pinch of catechu. While we ground it on a slab of stone, our hands would be dyed a deep maroon. We would draw many patterns on our palm and wrist, the shapes of the moon, stars and creepers.

My father did not like it at all when I painted my hands with balsam paste. He would say disapprovingly, “What’ve you put on your hands? It looks like cow dung?” I would hide my hands from him till the paste dried and I washed my hands before I went to bed. If I became even slightly absentminded, the paste would leave stains on my clothes.

I stole balsam flowers from Anadi Das’s garden a number of times. Anadi babu was our village policeman. After the school was closed for the day, we boys and girls would run homeward happy and without care. All restrictions would vanish. I would join my friends, instead of following my father. The day I wanted to pick some flowers, I would tell my friends, “I am not well. You go. I’ll walk slowly.” They would walk on, leaving me behind. I would slink into Anadi babu’s garden and pick a lot of flowers. Luckily, I was never caught doing this. It would have been so embarrassing if I had been. People would have said—“Rama master’s daughter was a thief.” This would have been even more embarrassing than the disgrace one had to face when one was uninterested in one’s studies.

**(Mo piladina, pp. 7-14)**





## Durgabati Tripathy (1929-2014)

Durgabati Tripathy was born in 1929. Her father was a professor of Physics at Ravenshaw College, Cuttack, and so her childhood was spent at its campus. She matriculated from Ravenshaw Girls' High School in 1939. In 1945, she was studying intermediate science when she got married to Amarendra Tripathy, a sardar of Kuradiha pragona under Pratap Chandra Bhanjadeo, the king of Mayurbhanj. After her marriage, she came to live with her in-laws' family in Mayurbhanj.

Durgabati wrote her first poem in 1939 remembering her mother, who she had recently lost. Her first short story was published in the “Nari jagata” section of the news daily *Prajatantra* in 1950. She has published several volumes of short stories, poems and essays, and has been felicitated by a number of cultural institutions for her contribution to literature. Her memoir, *Suneli smrutira surabhi* (Golden Memories) was published in 2008. She writes about her life at her in-laws' family, where she always thought of herself as nothing less than a queen. The excerpt selected here focuses on her mother-in-law's reminiscences. She presents a tapestry of recollections that tells us about what it feels like to be in her mother-in-law's skin. It puts one in the mind of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, which is not, in fact, Alice B. Toklas's autobiography; instead, it is Gertrude Stein's idea of what such a book might look like. Her mother-in-law narrates her story of life and recounts painful experiences without bitterness or regrets.

To convey the living texture of a life and a personality,

Durgabati Tripathy focuses on the minute details of daily life, for it is these details that re-create a living character, and human beings need not be eminent or famous to provide worthy subjects. She celebrates the goodness, generosity and wisdom of ordinary men and women to weave an invaluable web of daily life while employing devices of fiction suitable for autobiographical ends. Unburdened of the restraint and self-control required for autobiography, her prose glows with a poetic luminosity as she ruminates about chance events.

### Golden Memories

*Rub yourself with turmeric,  
You would see your kith and kin  
only after you cross river Subarnarekha.*

I don't remember from whom I had heard the above saying, but the words have left a deep impression on my mind. No matter how deeply I longed to see my birthplace, which lay beyond river Subarnarekha, I could never go back there. The time I recall must be around 1908. I was four; my younger sister was one and a half years. Accompanied by our mother, we were ferried on a boat across the river in spate. Black clouds had covered the sky; now and then, flashes of lightning and the sound of thunder filled me with dread. I don't remember exactly who escorted us; may be one of our maternal uncles did.

Sweet memories of the remote village, Jagannathpur, which we had left behind, now crowd my mind. Wrapped in a four-yard-long sari, I would lay *badis* on tin foils with my tiny hands along with my aunts (father's sisters). I would fetch water in a little brass tumbler from the well; snatching the brush from my aunts' hands, I would draw weird patterns on the floor with rice paste. Our huge house flashes before my mind's eye—its long veranda, the granary, and the well in the middle of the marbled courtyard. I had left my beautiful childhood there.

My father had been critically ill; he passed away.

After my father died, we went to live at my uncle's (father's younger brother) house in Baripada town. My maternal uncle—he wore a pigtail on his head; marks of sandalwood paste were painted across his forehead, shoulders and chest, and he wore a sacred thread—had suggested to my uncle that he would take care of us. My uncle had rejected this proposal summarily. He had told my maternal uncle point-blank—"No, no, no. I won't let my elder brother's children live with you. I know how well you would look after them. When these daughters would be barely seven, you would offer them in marriage to a poor Brahmin. No way. I won't let this happen. They'll stay with me. What if they've lost their father? I'm still alive."

This incident lingers in my mind, faint as a dream. I stood hiding behind my mother and peeped to learn what was happening. May be, I was trying to figure things out in my childish mind. My uncle's thunderous voice had made me shiver. I had buried my face in my mother's sari-end.

Before his death, my father had gone completely mad. My grandfather had got a room with iron railings built exclusively to keep him locked up. Every morning four stout servants would drag him out to a pond, make him stand inside chest-deep water and put a mud-pack on his head. But why did my father go mad? Why was a room with iron railings built?

My father was the eldest son of my grandfather, Gobinda Chandra Mohapatra, the guru of King Sri Rama Chandra Bhanjadeo. After he propitiated many gods and goddesses, and went on a pilgrimage to the temple of Sri Jagannath, my father was born to him after the birth of seven daughters. The darling son of my grandparents, my father was handsome like a god. He was studying BA when he showed signs of insanity. Why? What led to such a gradual loss of his mind? Why did he fail his examinations?

During those days, Bengalis enjoyed a lot of power in Odisha. In every school in Odisha, Bengali teachers were appointed even to teach Odia. Odia nationalist leaders were trying to counter their

influence. My grandfather enjoyed high esteem as a scholar. He was associated with famous Odia nationalists such as Madhusudan Das, Pundit Gopabandhu Das, Phakirmohana Senapati and Madhusudan Rao. So, when he was commissioned to write some text-books in Odia, he took a house on rent in Cuttack for this purpose. He sent a messenger to bring grandmother over there.

My grandmother was so foolish! She said—"I won't go to Cuttack leaving the ancestral home of my in-laws."

After grandmother declined his request a number of times, grandfather sent through a messenger an ultimatum—"If you don't come here, I'll marry again."

My grandmother did not realise the seriousness of the situation. She retorted—"Let him marry again if he likes! I've daughters and sons."

My grandfather was already a father of eight daughters and two sons when he married for the second time to a Christian girl in Cuttack. I don't know what customs he followed to marry her. In course of time, he had four sons and two daughters from his second wife.

His eldest son had been too obedient to oppose him openly, but the incident must have left him seriously disturbed. His inner revulsion must have grown unbearable and finally, it must have been impossible for him to control himself. I was already born. After my younger sister was born, father grew even more unstable. My grandfather came back to our village in Baripada along with his second wife. Who knows if he ever regretted his decision of taking a second wife? He built a concrete room fitted with iron railings and locked his mad son inside it. He also provided him with medical treatment.

His youngest son from his first marriage, my uncle, left my grandfather's house. He regarded his father's property as "impure" and renounced it. He gave up his studies in a fit of anger and started working as a magistrate under the king of Baripada. He bought a piece of land and got a house built there.

My mother survived father for only a month. She died of cholera on the day following an ekadashi. On the day of ekadashi, she lay in a delirious state. I still remember her hallucinations on her deathbed. I don't know if anyone had asked her to give her testimony or for whom her words were meant. I still remember the words—"Please don't ask me to do anything. I'm burning inside. What testimony do you ask me to give? Two of his symbols are in the world. Who can I give anything to? Why?" She died the next day.

Why did I gaze at my father when a mud-pack was put on his head, standing behind my grandmother, who would wipe her tears with her sari-end? My eyes shed tears ceaselessly. Did I long to lie in my father's lap? Did I see all these in reality? Did I feel anything? Could all these float across the mind of an orphaned, desolate child like a dream and fill her with longings?

Our life underwent a change after the death of my parents. My grandmother went to live with my uncle at Baripada taking us with her. At night, we two sisters would cuddle on bed on either side of her, our heads resting on her fair shoulders. Wrapped in a parrot-green red-bordered sari, seven-yards-long, I would stand behind one of the wooden pillars in my uncle's house and gaze at everyone. Perhaps I judged everything with my naive understanding. The moment I caught sight of uncle, I would hide myself in a room.

My uncle would call aunt and ask her—"Why does Uma hide herself on seeing me? Are you not looking after her well?"

Aunt would reply—"She's filled with all the shyness of the world."

Uncle would send us to learn different styles of stitching from a few women living in our neighbourhood. He would persuade us to learn cooking different dishes. We were sent to school. When we got back from school in the afternoon, grandmother would serve us watered-rice and roasted dried fish behind closed doors. Delicacies would be prepared in the kitchen for my uncle's sons.

Grandmother would explain us—“A daughter always belonged to her in-laws’ family. No one knows what kind of a family she would find herself in after her marriage. No one knows how things would go there. She may not get to eat such delicacies at her in-laws’ place. She should be used to eating the cheapest food available.”

Perhaps my uncle suspected that we were not served delicacies, which were prepared at home. So he had left instructions that, after he finished eating, we two sisters should be served food on his plate. Now, when I remember his generosity, my eyes fill with tears. My heart overflows with gratitude even after the passage of so many years. As the head of the family, he was served all kinds of delicacies. He would leave portions of these in his plate and bowls for us.

My younger sister, Jema, was an obstinate child. She would cry at the slightest provocation. She was fond of fish heads. Uncle would always leave part of a fish head in his plate. But, one day, he had eaten the whole piece absentmindedly. Jema had fallen asleep. Aunt woke her up and made her sit and have her meal. The moment she touched the plate, she started wailing—“Aunt! My head? Where’s my head? Give me my head, give me my head...”

Uncle broke into a fit of laughter. He asked my aunt—“What does she want? Whose head?”

Aunt said—“She’s asking for a fish head.”

Uncle ordered immediately—“Give her a fish head. Give her a whole fried fish head. Let her eat.”

Such was our uncle!

Let me describe uncle’s house. It had a long, high, concrete veranda. Four bedrooms stood in a row facing the south. On the southern side, four mud-built rooms were occupied by servants and maids, who helped aunt with household work. There were three more tin-roofed houses with mud walls and concrete floors. The long courtyard was divided into two parts—the front yard and the inner yard. There was a well in the middle of the inner courtyard,

and the small kitchen overlooked it. The veranda where we had our meals was wide. Burdened with the job of looking after her babies, aunt was not able to do all the household chores herself. Udia, who used to work at my grandfather's, had come to stay with uncle and served as a cook. Menki nani, my father's cousin, looked after us. Hara's mother and others did various other chores at home. Though the doors and windows were made of ordinary wood, the furniture in his house had intricate patterns and designs carved on them. The door at the entrance was the size of a window, which from outside did not appear to be a door at all. One had to squeeze through it to get in. After my wedding, this was made into a proper door. With the disappearance of this window-sized door, a part of our old life style came to an end.

Our beautiful small town faced water scarcity during the summer, but our well remained full even in summer. With my aunt's permission, our neighbours came to fetch water from our well. One day, my uncle caught sight of the servant of our neighbour when he came to fetch water in the noon. My uncle's fair face turned red in anger in an instant. His roar shook our house. He punished the middle-aged servant and made him promise that he would never step into the premises to fetch water from the well at midday. Afterwards, he reprimanded my aunt—"Grown up girls are at home. You don't notice anything nor do you keep a watch on anyone."

I was the cause of all this fury, for I was the "grown-up" girl. I was twelve at the time. I felt like a thief when he said things like this. Now, let me describe myself. I was nearly five-feet-five-inches, petite and fair. I had red lips and an oval face. A cascade of thick dark hair reached down to my knees. Neither I nor my grandmother could comb it properly. Only Menki nani could comb it and make a long plait. Whoever saw me said that I was very beautiful. Since childhood, at my grandmother's instance, parrot-green saris with red borders were always bought for me. Everyone said that I looked eye-catching draped in a parrot-green, red-bordered sari.

No outsider was allowed to come inside our premises. Though uncle was proud of my good looks, he worried about finding a suitable groom for me. To him I seemed to grow very fast! One day, his eyes fell on one of his friends; his wife had died leaving behind two children, a nine-year-old son and a three-month-old daughter. He was a jagirdar sardar at the king's court. He was thirty-five. Only his hair had greyed; otherwise, he was a handsome man. Above all, there was no demand for dowry from his side. My marriage was fixed with him. My grandmother had often requested aunt to give me my mother's seven-stringed gold necklace or the six-ounce gold armlets at the time of my wedding, but there was now no need for it. The groom wanted only a bride.

A Bengali woman who lived in our neighbourhood had come to attend my wedding. She remarked—"Ah! Such a beautiful daughter! She looks like a goddess! How could you offer her to an old man, and that, too, one who lived in a village? How could you do this, sister? I'd have throttled her had she been my own daughter, but would never have given her in marriage to such a man."

My aunt sighed—"It's her fate! Does a man ever grow old? A woman is deemed old after she gives birth to a child!"

I had heard their conversation. Did any feeling of disappointment arise in my mind? Who knows? A chapter in my life came to an end. A curtain fell on my life as an unmarried girl.

My mother-in-law was eighty. She sent a message to my uncle—"I want to see my daughter-in-law. Please send her here." My uncle sent me in a car to my in-laws' place along with my younger sister and seven cousins. As I had not attained puberty and my *puani* ceremony had not been celebrated, he did not send me unescorted.

My mother-in-law showed me the hearth, a bowl, a ladle in the kitchen. She gave me a potful of ghee and asked me—"Do you know how to prepare mohanbhog?"

I nodded my head to say "yes".



She said—"Prepare mohanbhog with broken wheat for the children."

I was frying some wheat with ghee in a pan; a messenger came running into the house. While still gasping for breath, he said—"Grandma! Grandma! The mutineers have reached the riverbank. Leave the house along with the children immediately."

The pan was put away hurriedly. The house nearby was actually my mother-in-law's parental house. Her brother's son, a Kaviraj, lived there. We nine brothers and sisters were left with Desia Kaviraj. My husband's son from his first wife was kept hidden in a big earthen jar meant for storing grains on the mud and bamboo roof below the thatch of someone's house. The housemaid, Chanda implored my mother-in-law to leave the place, but she refused to budge—"My goodness! My son isn't at home. How could I leave the house?"

In a moment, hundreds, thousands of men wearing loincloths with staves, axes, arrows and bows in hand, and smeared with ash, rushed into the village, shouting. They formed a mile-long procession. One of them came out and asked my mother-in-law—"You old woman! Where's your son?"

My mother-in-law said what she had been tutored to say, "I'm not on good terms with my son. I don't know where he is."

In fact, the day before, a messenger, disguised in a woman's attire, had come with a letter hiding it in his artificial bun. The letter informed my husband of the imminent mutiny and asked him to flee. He did not agree to do so at first, but, afterwards, he smeared his body with ash, wore a loin-cloth, put a gun inside a bag, wrapped himself in a blanket and left the village at night. He walked through the forest for about ten, twelve kosas and took shelter at a safe haven.

The mutineers did not trust what my mother-in-law told them. They hit her with a bamboo staff and threatened her—"You won't tell the truth then! Do you want to be hit again?"

The eighty-year-old woman was fragile like a ripe mango. Blood oozed from her shoulders. My mother-in-law knew the man who had hit her. Tears rolled from her eyes. She cursed him in a pain-stricken voice—"Can't you recognise me, Motiram? You've raised your hands on this old woman. May leprosy wither your hand, may worms devour it..."

Her housemaid, Chanda, while dragging my mother-in-law away, kept saying loudly—"I told the old woman to come away. Come away. But why would she pay any heed?"

My mother-in-law wailed in pain. Her nephew's wife massaged her with a piece of cloth soaked in hot water mixed with salt. Surprisingly, Motiram contracted leprosy late in life and worms devoured his sores before he died. My mother-in-law's curse came true!

The mutineers circled the house several times. They tried to locate the chieftain but in vain. They exclaimed—"No, he isn't here."

My husband was a rich farmer. He used to receive awards from the king at annual exhibitions for the excellent fruits and vegetables produced in his farms. On the flat roof under the thatch made of mud and bamboo in his house were stocked potato seeds and rows of pots containing jaggery. Who had the time to bother about what the mutineers ate or what they carried away with them and what they broke and threw into the well? They smashed the pots and pans, took away the ornaments of my husband's first wife, and scattered all other stuff. Then they threw lighted torches onto our thatched house. The house caught fire in no time and the bamboo knots exploded. Dense black smoke engulfed the whole area.

A group of mutineers burst into the neighbour's house, where we had taken shelter and told my husband's cousin, "You, old Kaviraj, take this brass container and give us ten rupees for it. We know that the chieftain has married once again; hand his

son and wife over to us.” My husband’s cousin pleaded with them, saying, “Kill me if you like. Please don’t do them any harm.”

He was a Kaviraj, after all. He must have dispensed many nostrums to them and cured them of their illnesses. His words calmed the mutineers. All the same, they took ten rupees in exchange of the brass pot, shouting, “not here, not here” and galloping wildly they trooped out of the village, may be to the house of another chieftain, who had not obliged them.

I don’t know why this uprising against the king had taken place. According to tribal customs, the rebels had sent a messenger carrying a string of knotted straw to my husband. This was meant to invite my husband to join them. If the invitee accepted it, it meant that he was on their side, and, if the invitee returned it, it meant that he refused to side with them. When the string of knotted straw had been brought in, my husband was away from home. One of his nephews, who was at home, had rejected the overture of the mutineers, abused the messenger and threw him out after urinating on the string. This had obviously incensed the mutineers.

In a few days’ time, with the help of the soldiers the king had requisitioned from the British, the uprising was put down. Some of the rebel leaders were sentenced to life, some were shot dead and some were deported to the Andaman. The rebels were made to repair the house they had burnt down without being paid for their labour, but more of this later.

As I mentioned earlier, my uncle was a magistrate. On that day, someone from the court informed him that the rebels had burnt down the house of the chieftain of Durgapur and killed all the members of his family. “Oh, I’ve lost my family,” he cried and immediately set off riding his white horse. While leaving home, he had asked someone to travel to village Durgapur as fast as possible in a car. My uncle arrived in Durgapur and heaved a sigh of relief when he saw that we were alive. The car also arrived. We returned to the small town where we belonged.

Yet, the spine-chilling experience and the strange fear I had felt on that day linger in my heart even today. Can I ever forget it?

Before I came to live in my in-laws' house, I had studied for a year at Ravenshaw Girls' School in Cuttack. I was put up in the hostel there. My husband had arranged this for me. His first wife had committed suicide. This incident had left him disturbed, and he spent most of his time visiting places of pilgrimage in India. I first came to my in-laws' house when I was fourteen. From the day I arrived there, I had to look after my eighty-year-old mother-in-law, ten-year-old step-son, and my little step-daughter all by myself. I had carried with me an old box in which my uncle and aunt had packed my clothes, old and new. I wore only a gold chain, which I was wearing since my childhood. Later, my husband got a lot of ornaments made for me.

The birthday of the king of Mayurbhanj used to be celebrated with great pomp in our town. Beautiful things from other cities would be put on sale on the occasion. Housemaids of the royal palace went around wearing expensive Banarasi silk saris. My younger sister, Jema had once gone to the exhibition. When she came back, she told my aunt, "Aunt, find me a job as a housemaid in the palace."

"Why on earth should I do such a thing?"

"Don't you see what beautiful saris the housemaids are wearing? I would like to put on such saris."

My aunt told uncle of this, and he bought a Banarasi silk sari for her at the time of her wedding.

I don't remember who had ushered me into the bridal chamber after the ritual by the sacred fire had been performed. My husband stood in the room. I prostrated myself at his feet. He bolted the door and took me into his arms. Then he led me to the bed and sat close to me. He cupped my face and kept looking into my eyes. His eyes swam in tears and his lips trembled. He whispered softly, "How beautiful you are! You could have married someone

much younger than me. I haven't done the right thing by marrying you. But what could I have done, tell me? I've my old mother and two little kids to look after. What other option did I have? If not you, I'd have had to marry someone else."

Then he told me about his first wife and the daily squabbles between his wife and his sister-in-law, his elder brother's wife. He told me how his first wife had endeared herself to everyone by her beauty, virtues and affectionate disposition. At the same time, she was very willful because she was an orphan and had grown up among four doting maternal uncles and their wives, who had pampered and spoilt her. She would never brook a single harsh word from anyone. Whenever she finished cooking and came out of the kitchen, my elder brother's wife would go in and throw lots of salt into the dishes. She would wipe her soot-stained hands on her clean sari hung out to dry. All this she did to make everyone scold his wife for having put too much salt in the food and for wearing soot-stained clothes.

Once, when the two women quarrelled without end for three days, my husband had felt thoroughly fed up and said out of disgust, "Your screams make the village shake. Why one of you don't die! Then the quarrelling would stop; we could be spared this embarrassment and humiliation in the village! Don't you know how to kill yourself? Let me tell you how to end your lives: you die if you take opium or poison or if you hang yourself or jump into a well! Choose one of these methods! Stop being a nuisance once and for all!"

That night, my husband's first wife took poison.

In the evening, after the day's work was done, my husband used to spend time playing cards with his friends on the veranda of the Bhagabata room in the village. That evening, too, he was busy playing cards. He sat leaning against the wall and was about to get up. It must have been ten o' clock at night. He felt as if someone had landed a heavy blow on his back. He started and looked back, but there was no one around. Only the wall stared back at him.

He did not feel like playing cards and got up and walked towards his house. It was the month of Bhadrav. It poured with rain for a while; the moon played hide and seek behind the clouds. It was the time of the year when pancakes were made from ripe palm fruits. His first wife used to make delicious palm cakes. He sat down to eat. His wife served him condensed milk, palm cakes and vegetable curry. However, that day she did not ask him like she always did, "Have a little more. Is the cake tasty?" Instead, she simply said, "Eat it up."

My husband looked up at her face. Tears stood in her eyes. Her bright face had fallen. He suddenly grew suspicious. He stopped eating and got up. His mother used to take a little opium every day. A farmhand had brought her an ounce of opium in the morning. He went straight to his mother and asked her to give him the opium container and found that it was empty.

His wife had swallowed the opium. The whole night, he made her walk and drink saline water to get her throw up. He did not let her sleep. She survived.

In course of time, she gave birth to a son and a daughter. Everything seemed normal. When her son was nine and her daughter only three-months-old, they had a fight over their son's misconduct. One day, their son came home from his hostel without permission; my husband gave him a slap and made him stand in the sun. The mother took the side of her son. The couple quarrelled bitterly over this. My husband, infuriated, went and slept in the living room. His first wife laid down her three-months-old daughter beside her mother-in-law, told her that she was going out and swallowed all the opium from a container. She must have put a little opium on her daughter's tongue. Or else, how could she lay fast asleep till the morning? The cries of the infant daughter awakened the old woman in the morning. The effect of opium was wearing off. Roused from sleep, she desperately called her son. "Come running, everything is finished. What shall I do? We're ruined. What shall I do?"

Her cries made my husband rush in. His first wife had slept in the kitchen having bolted it from inside. She was groaning in pain. The door was forced and she was carried into the courtyard. In a few moments, everything was over. In deep mortification, her husband, the chieftain of the king sat, his head hanging low. In the midst of all this commotion he had sent for the police officer from the village police station. He confessed everything before the police officer. The officer had a look at the corpse and allowed it to be cremated without sending it for post-mortem.

I looked up at my husband and blurted out, “No matter what happens, no matter how harshly you scold me, I’ll never abandon my children to their fate and commit suicide. I’m not so weak-hearted.” I had no children at that time! My husband looked at me tenderly and smiled indulgently, which made me feel terribly self conscious.

I tried to heal my husband’s wound. I would prepare dishes his son relished. I thought all step-mothers were not partial like Kaikeyi in *Ramayana*; I would never become like her. I put up with all the tantrums of the little motherless girl. She complained about everything and she was always difficult. At times, she would hold my hand and say, “I want to bite it.” One day, I let her bite my left hand and busied myself with doing something with my right hand. A servant or the old record-keeper carried her away by force and tied up her two hands.

She howled, “Wait till my father comes.”

In fact, as soon as her father came home, she complained, “My hands were tied up today. You scold these people, hit them.”

Her father immediately pretended to be furious and shouted, “Who dared tie up my darling daughter’s hands?”

“She was biting our mistress’s hand.”

“My golden girl, were you biting your mother’s hands?”

“Yes, yes, I did. I’ll bite her hands again.”

Her father picked her up, took her in his arms and said, “My darling, you should never bite anyone.” While talking to her, he turned to look at me. It seemed as though his gaze dripped with gratitude.

Slowly, my husband, who used to spend his time restlessly wandering away from home, began taking an interest in household affairs and turned into a perfect family man. In course of time, I was blessed with two sons and two daughters. Land was bought. A house was built in the town. Those days, we did not have radio or TV like we do now, but people were addicted to watching jattras and plays. At times, my husband would take me in a bullock cart to watch plays put up by Annapurna theatre. He was a vegetarian, but he would angle for fish since I loved eating fish.

My son was exceptionally handsome. One day, King Purna Chandra Bhanjadeo saw him being carried in the arms of his father. He came to see him frequently. Whenever he came on a tour of this part of his kingdom, he would make a point of visiting our house and seeing my son.

My husband would lay my son on a mat on the veranda. In those days, custom prohibited kings from entering the house of any ordinary subject. His Majesty would place one of his feet on the stone lying below the veranda and fix his gaze for hours on end on my son’s smiling face and his bright body rubbed with turmeric. My son looked lovely wearing a gold necklace, a girdle and bracelets. His curly hair fell across his forehead, on which glittered a kohl-spot. It was a pity that his majesty remained childless till his death. My son, too, was not destined for royal life. This king, who was adored by his subjects, died an untimely death and his throne passed to his younger brother, Pratap Chandra Bhanjadeo.

My grandmother was alive at the time and used to visit me occasionally. She felt too shy to appear before my husband. We used to tease her about her being nice towards her husband’s second wife, who was a Christian—“That woman ruined your life, took away your husband from you. And you’re making friends with



her? Don't you feel angry?" Grandmother would whisper, "Why, why should I feel bad? She came here because your grandfather brought her. Why should I blame her? After all, she's younger than me. Should I not be nice to her as I am the older of the two and look after the kids? They're also my children. What if I haven't given birth to them? How does it matter?"

How surprising! How could an ignorant woman born and brought up in a remote village be capable of such generosity?

My uncle and aunt used to visit me sometimes. They used to come to perform the *padhuan* ritual of my son. They used to bring him silk clothes in a packet. Everyone—my mother-in-law, nephews and nieces—loved me a lot. My sister in law, my husband's elder sister lived in Ushagaria, which lay three miles away from our village. Whenever she got upset with her son and daughter-in-law, she would walk all the way from her in-laws' village to our place. She would slump into the cement bench on the veranda.

My husband would tell me that his elder sister had arrived; I would go to her carrying a jug of water. I would wash her feet, wipe them with the end of my sari and would usher her into our house. She would sniffle and dwell on the misdeeds of her daughter-in-law. After ten days or so, she would express an eagerness to go back home on the pretext that she missed her grandson. I would send her off giving her gifts of fine rice, pulses, vegetables, bananas and coconuts as though she was a young bride leaving home. She was thirty years my senior! I would give her new clothes and slip ten rupees into her hand. For doing all this, I never took my husband's permission nor did I feel that I needed to do so. Nonetheless, he used to feel very pleased whenever he saw me give anything to his sister. Stroking my head, his sister would tell me, "Even my mother never arranged presents for me with such loving care. You're an angel."

In the midst of so much happiness, such love, I forgot the days gone by.

Days wore on. My husband had gone to the king's court in the town for some work. A vein in his head burst due to blood pressure and he fainted. Messengers came and drove me to him. I tried to make my husband regain consciousness. I gave him medicine, fruit juice, glucose at prescribed intervals according to the doctor's instructions. I wrestled with the god of death. I spent sleepless nights watching him. At last, I won, but my victory was only a partial one. The left side of his body was paralysed.

My husband had bought a car which cost one hundred twenty-five rupees. It had to be sold off as our financial situation worsened. We began to live in straightened circumstances. Three years later, we lost our *jagirdari* as a result of the measures taken by Sardar Vallabhbai Patel. My younger son, who was looking after the *jagir* after my husband had fallen ill, had a small income. But losing the *jagirdari* dealt a severe blow to my husband and mentally unsettled him. One day, he suddenly died of brain malaria and left me absolutely alone in this world.

After we lost our *jagir*, my second son looked after our landed property. My eldest son is employed in the Railways. He told me, "Mother, come and live with me." My younger son is a doctor. He also wanted me to stay with him. I visited them and stayed with them. Everyone looked after me very well. But all the same, I felt like a burden on others. I came back to the house where I had spent long years with my husband. I chose to settle there. Maybe, human beings value their freedom more than comfort and luxury. My husband used to say, "We're but travellers riding the vehicle of life; we get down when we arrive at our destination." I wonder how long it would take me to reach my destination!

One day, I had come to my son's house. He had brought some meat. My grandson demanded, "Grandma, you cook the meat today." His mother protested, "My dear, today is an *ekadashi*. How could she cook meat on a holy day like this?"

I immediately explained to my daughter-in-law, "My daughter, have you not heard what Jagannath Das says in the *Bhagabata*. "One

who kills an animal to feed another deserves a place in heaven.” My children would eat meat curry. If this gives them joy and contentment, why shouldn’t I cook meat? I feel no qualms about cooking meat on an *ekadashi*.” Although it was my day of fasting, I cooked meat and my son and grandson ate the dish with great relish.

One day, my darling grandson went to watch a late-night film in a cinema in Balasore. On his way back to Cuttack, he went to eat at a road side restaurant. But when he found that it was closed, he came to our village which lay five miles away from the road. He came and woke me up and said—“What’s this? How come you’ve gone to bed in the evening?” I rubbed my eyes and replied, “You know, in villages we eat early in the evening and go to bed.”

“Wake up. My friends are eager to eat dishes cooked by you. Go and cook whatever you can. We’ll quickly eat and go off.”

I got up and called the domestic help. He took out a cock from the chicken coop and dressed it. He ground the spices. I lit the fireplace and cooked khechudi and chicken curry. I finished cooking and served them in half an hour’s time. They ate happily. When they washed their hands, I heard a cock crow. Dawn was breaking. I was surprised and asked my grandson, “My dear, you told me that it was evening!”

My grandson burst out laughing. “We watched a film. All the hotels were closed. Who would have given us anything to eat if we had gone home? We would have been reprimanded instead. So we came to you. Now go and have a little sleep. We’re off.”

This is also an example of divine play of the playful lord!

These days I am not keeping well. My sons brought me to a hospital. My daughter-in-law nursed me day and night. I am unable to eat anything. Early in the morning, I would have a drop of juice. At about seven in the morning, my son would bring me a sweet or a savoury or a spoonful of fruit juice. At midday, my grand daughter-in-law would send me all kinds of dishes I ask her to cook, but I

can't relish anything at all. At three in the afternoon, my elder grand daughter-in-law would bring me different kinds of pancakes, but I would not be able to eat them.

My son, who is a doctor, said I had the symptoms of cancer. I am under treatment from day one, so the ailment has not developed into cancer. I am in this condition for the last two years and four months. I don't know what goes wrong with some organs in my body and I undergo severe bouts of pain now and then. But why bother? Your car, scooters, wrist-watches, bicycles get out of order now and then. This body, too, is a god-made machine. There is nothing surprising about it developing problems. When I explained my ailments in this manner to my children, they brought me back to my house in the village. I now live there counting my days.

**(Suneli smrutira surabhi, pp. 126-147)**



## Mandakini Das (1928- 2009)

Mandakini Das was born on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1928 in Gobara, Ganjam. Her father, Banchhanidhi Patnaik was a famous freedom fighter of Odisha. She had studied up to class seven, and had acquired mastery over Sanskrit language through her own efforts. As a child, she learnt Odishi classical music at home from a tutor. The title of “Vani Binodini” was conferred on her for her impressive talent in singing. Apart from singing, she also devoted her time to writing poems and lyrics. Her lyrics have been broadcast on All India Radio, Cuttack on several occasions. She was married to Naba Kishore Das, who was a renowned advocate in Cuttack, in 1944. She was a mother of four sons and four daughters.

Her memoir, *Smruti surabhi* (Fragrance of Memory) was published by Banchhanidhi Smruti Pratisthan in 2008. She presents the portraits of people whom she dearly loved and introduces them one after another, as if she turns the leaves of a photo album. Unlettered women come out as adorable human beings rich in wisdom borne of experience. In the excerpt, one finds her singing Odishi songs at the request of her elders. Besides, she writes about her uncle, who had left a deep impact on her, and the Vaishnava way of life.

### A Mark on Wet Clay

A mark made on wet clay remains indelible. Many small and big incidents occur in one’s childhood. The sum of such incidents may be termed “Life”. There are some experiences which one can never forget till the last moment of one’s life. In evenings, the breeze wafts

in the fragrance of flowers from distant gardens, which refresh and delight one's body and mind. Has anyone seen or touched the fragrance carried in by the wind, which so pleases our senses? No, it can only be felt.

In those days, I was learning to play the harmonium. After we finished lunch, my father would sit down to spin on charkha about three in the afternoon. I would sit down and play the harmonium. Puri-uncle would accompany me on the mridanga. Father would ask me to sing a *champu*—“*bhanga chahan...*” Grandmother would come and demand, “Now, sing “*kesharakunja sheja re*”. Pila-mother would want to listen to—“*ki nama boilu tubigo lalite*”. My mother's favourite song was, “*duti kara dbari Hari boile kishori*”. Bhula-uncle would say, “Daughter, please sing *aare nauri, e ghata re nabandha taree*”.

All these memories are treasured in my mind like rare collectible items in a museum. On some days, I go down the memory lane when I find a few moments of leisure in my care-worn life.

It seems the past lies like the steps one leaves behind while climbing a staircase. Memories acquire significance when they resurface in the mind. These refresh one's body and mind. When one feels worried and helpless, memories caress one's body and ask one to have patience. Old age connotes a period of waiting. Solaced by memories, my troubled life would grow tranquil for some moments. To my surprise, I would wish to sing all the time. I would wonder if I could help others blossom like flowers through my singing. I know if I imagined accomplishing impossible things, I would surely be a figure of fun for others. And yet, I cannot restrain myself. How I wish I could drop dead while still singing a song.

My Puri-uncle was my guru. When I sang, as I have said earlier, he would play the mridanga. He was fair, lean and tall. One could never forget his looks if one saw him even for once. His wife was also a beautiful and simple-hearted woman. She was quiet by nature and always remained busy doing household chores. One

would not feel her presence even if she was in a room. When uncle called me “daughter”, his voice sounded as though it was filled with nectar. He was extremely fond of me. True, we were related by blood, but my relationship with him went beyond it. Perhaps uncle knew how the bond between us grew strong.

Once, a group of goudiya vaishnavas visited our village. They were put up in the hall in our house. They sang devotional songs, performed kirtans, and chanted mantras. My uncle got initiated into the goudiya sect. He started wearing a string of tulsi beads round his neck and a tilak mark on his forehead; he looked even more handsome than before. The image of Chaitanya would dance before one’s eyes when one set one’s eyes on my uncle. I must have been eight or ten-years-old then. Every day, uncle worshipped the images of Radha and Krishna and Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. He would deck the images with garlands, offer incense and food to them. He would offer worship to them every morning and evening while chanting *mahamantras* in a mellifluous voice.

I remember he used to sing, “*Hari haraye namo, Krishna jadabaya namo, jadabaya, madhabaya, keshabaya namo...*” while playing cymbals. I would pick whatever flowers I could get for the deities and give them to him. This would please him a lot. Uncle and aunt both observed a fast on the occasion of Janmastami. The day after, a feast was held at our house. Our house would resound with the sound of devotional songs.

Once every month or two months, Vaishnava saints would come from Nabadwip to our village. Mattresses would be laid on village paths. The holy men would give spiritual discourses. I would sit and hear these from the beginning till the end. I would also listen to *mahamantras* being chanted. Gradually, these started to have a deep impact upon my mind and illuminated my inner world. I could not understand the import of all this at that time. I got married at an early age, which I thought was god’s will. When a daughter got married, she was presented with gifts and dowry. I don’t remember what gifts I received from whom nor do I have

the gifts with me today. But what I received from my uncle was immeasurably precious.

My life's journey has always been filled with difficulties. The wonderful bejewelled lamp which I received from my Puri-uncle burns steadily within me whenever I negotiate the thorny, dark alleys in the forest of life. Its light has helped me overcome all difficulties along the dark paths of my life. I am now approaching the journey's end. This is why I say that Puri-uncle left a deep impression on my mind. He was my guru, the first teacher of my life.

**(Smruti surabhi, pp. 21-23)**





## Rama Devi (b. 1928)

Rama Devi was born in Puri in 1928. Her father, Nilakantha Das was a famous Odia nationalist leader. As a child, she was fond of listening to stories from her mother. Years later, she fondly retells these stories in her memoir.

Her memoir, *Para padartha* (One Who Belongs to Another) was published in 1998. It evokes the intimate world of domesticity, a world without men. The memoir celebrates the friendship between two village women who were emotionally dependent upon each other, one a widow and the other's husband was a busy public figure. In her eyes, they were tied to each other by a divine bond. Rama Devi's adoration for her aunt, who had exercised the greatest influence over her, account for the appeal of the narrative.

The language of *Para padartha* is intensely lyrical, and reflects the varied rhythms of colloquial Odia. The slimness of her memoir seems to stem from a graceful old-world reticence and a reluctance to dwell on the personal.

### One Who Belongs to Another

My mind drifts away, far away, on painful sleepless nights. Adolescent as ever, it wanders aimlessly. It enters my friend's house, and at other times, gets in my Baula's house. Standing in our backyard, it calls out, "Ashoka, Abhada, let's go and bathe in the river."

River Ratnachira—lovely lilies see their reflection on its crystal-clear water. During the monsoons, the river gets muddy and flows on carrying with it weeds like a busy house-wife going

about her chores. And in summer, the river lies like an old woman, her flat chest left exposed to the blistering sun. For girls like me, river Ratnachira was like a battlefield in mornings and evenings. We would ravage her. We would splash water at each other for hours on end. Most of our time was spent in her lap. In those days, the riverbank, especially for village girls, was like clubs in modern times. Allured by the gatherings on the riverbank, young girls and brides would come here at twilight and dawn.

There were three other bathing ghats along the river apart from this ghat meant exclusively for women. At these, stone-steps led down to the river-bed. The ghat meant for men was the best of these, where women were not allowed. The ghat meant for sudras of our village were not frequented by upper-caste Hindus. At the *anatutha*, no stone steps had been laid; the rites for the dead and such rituals were performed here.

Girls, married women, old women would assemble at the ghat. The old women of our village found the gang of adolescent girls irksome because they went about creating nuisance in the river. For hours on end, we would stay in the water holding our clay or brass pots. We would take a dip in the water, catch fish, and bring tiny fishes in cones made of siali leaves.

All the fun I had at the river would disappear the moment I stepped into our house. My mother would start scolding me. She would angrily say, “You’re becoming unruly day by day. You should know that you’re now a grown-up girl. You’d been in the river since morning churning the water. Don’t you feel contented till the mud underneath rises to the surface? Radha’s mother came and gave me a piece of her mind. I say, throw those fishes away!” I would throw the stuff immediately, change into dry clothes, and sit down to have food, my head lowered. Aunt would serve me watered-rice and fried fish. Mother would throw a glance at the fish and then at aunt, and suppressing her smile, say to her, “You’ll spoil her completely.” Aunt’s face would wear an expression of affected anger. She would blink at me and say, “Don’t ever catch fish from the river. You would earn a bad name at your in-laws’ house if you did so.”

Numerous incidents of the past rush into my mind. I weigh these in the scales of my mind. I mull over the present and the past. The people I remember now were of a species becoming rare these days. I remember my mother often saying this—

*What the heart yearns for  
It finds in the fullness of time.*

One man's gain sometimes means another's loss, and this scheme of things was planned by none other than God. My aunt's distant cousin, Bimala aunt, was destined to suffer in the hands of fate. She was Bainshi Das's wife. Bainshi Das was a distantly related brother-in-law of aunt. He was a Sanskrit pundit. He taught at a Sanskrit tol, which was supported by the king of Chikiti. He and his wife used to come to our village with their three sons. Those days, village women rarely wore gold ornaments, but Bimala had decked herself with gold jewellery, which immediately caught the onlookers' attention. Her neck was adorned with a necklace of intricate design; she wore heavy gold bangles, armlets, earrings and a nose-stud. But, alas! If the goddess of good fortune turned against someone, one would have to endure one's fate stoically.

One day, an official of the king brought Bimala, who was heavily pregnant then, and her three sons to our village. This created a stir in our village. The villagers learnt that Bimala Devi had become a widow; her husband, Bainshi Das was dead. She entered her house with her three sons. She could not find the time to cry her heart out. The village-chief accompanied by her kith and kin in the village arrived at her place.

The so-called learned men of our village held a discussion. It was decided that the tenth day rite for the departed soul must be observed first, other things would be taken care of later. Two days had already passed since Bainshi Das died. If the rites started on the ninth day and purification ritual was performed on the tenth day, the deceased man's soul would not attain peace. No one ever spared a thought for the family of four mourners and the unborn child. As there was no other way to begin the ritual for such a learned man

on the day he died, the death rites began from the fourth day. Three logs were driven into the ground and an earthen pot was placed on them. As Bimala's eldest son was still very young, a cousin of the dead pundit performed the death rites. When Bimala was asked for money, she offered whatever she had brought with her from the king's place. That was not enough to meet expenses required to perform the rituals specified by the chief. She gave away her gold necklace. It was sold and with the money received from it, the rites were observed properly.

On the tenth day, as though Bainshi Das took another birth, a baby son was born to his wife, and the house echoed with his cries. Everybody remarked, "The pundit met an untimely death due to snakebite. He hadn't overcome his attachment for his home. He returned to the world taking the form of his son." Amidst all this, Bimala aunt felt desolate as she had to face problem after problem.

Everybody took the ritual bath on the tenth day. It was now Bimala aunt's turn to take the ritual bath. She went accompanied by a barber woman to the riverbank. She felt the full weight of the loss of her husband on that day. The world suddenly appeared empty to her. Her poverty stared at her in the face. She was so numbed that not a drop of milk oozed from her breasts for her newborn. In such dire circumstances, how come milk form in a mother's breasts? All her blood seemed to have turned into tears, which her eyes shed all the while. How would the infant survive? He grew weak without getting proper nourishment and cried wretchedly all the time. Without having anything to eat, the mother and her three older children looked pale and weak.

It is said, "One who curses you also blesses you." Like an angel, aunt came to her rescue. She arranged goat's milk for the infant and saved his life. My mother supported her at this time and looked after the baby. Bimala aunt had to sell her ornaments and utensils to make ends meet.

Almighty is generous to those who are kind-hearted. Fortunately, two of Bimala aunt's extended family members

adopted her two younger sons. Her second son did not want to go to a distant village leaving his mother and started crying. His compassionate foster-father did not take him away from his mother, but provided for his upbringing. He bore all his responsibilities. In this way, her family could have a full meal every day. In due course, her eldest son finished his studies at the middle school, underwent teachers' training and became a teacher. He shouldered all the household responsibilities.

My mother had come up with an idea. Now and then, she would try to persuade aunt—"You've saved Bimala's youngest son's life. You should adopt him." Aunt would sometimes feel hurt and say, "Aren't your children mine?" Her Gangapani—that was what they called each other—would cleverly explain to her, "You belong to all. All belong to you. There's no power in this world which could separate us. You'll always be with me. My children love you more than they love me. However, would you receive the shradha offered by them after death? Satya has reached school-going age. Rear him up. You would earn dharma. We're brahmins. As you aren't of our caste, you always tell me that if you die on an ekadashi, I should pour a drop of water in your ears, not into your mouth. Will your soul find peace if you aren't offered shradha? Satya would open the doors of your house and offer worship there. Otherwise, your house would be encroached upon by others after your death. If you adopted him, he'd be your heir. Your family line would be secure. His children, his children's children would continue the family line. Whatever little money you've saved for yourself, would you take that with you when you die? Plant a human-tree. You'll see, it would bear many human-fruits."

At last, this was what happened. Aunt obeyed her Gangapani's words like one obeyed one's master's words.

Satya did well at his studies and landed a job immediately after completing his studies. Aunt arranged a divinely beautiful bride for him. She was as good-natured as she was beautiful. After Satya's wedding, his own mother left this mortal world without any regret.

Aunt had not been to her own house even for a day. Aunt's daughter-in-law lived in our house and was pampered by the two Gangapanis. If anyone asked her, she would shyly say, "I'm her daughter-in-law" and point towards aunt. She bore two sons and a daughter. All of them established themselves in due course. One of her sons became a doctor; another became an officer under the government of Odisha. Her daughter worked as a clerk; she got married to an engineer. One of her daughters-in-law taught at a school, another is a lecturer in a college. Hers was a beautiful, complete family.

Life went on. My two brothers lived in Cuttack. My father fell ill during his last days and stayed in Cuttack. My mother left our house in aunt's care. Even our record-keeper and farmhands worked under her supervision as my mother had to spend most of her time in Cuttack nursing my father. Now and then, she would come to the village to arrange money required for my father's treatment. His treatment required a lot of money. Sometimes, mother sold pieces of land for this purpose. Aunt would save every coin earned from selling land. She would never let anyone touch this money. If any farmhand needed money for death ritual or marriage ceremonies, she would go to Cuttack to obtain my mother's permission. Mother was fond of raising vegetable gardens. The Madhuvan garden stood by a pond at her backyard. The trees in the garden bore fruits of all kinds—water rose apple, mango, jackfruit, sapota, and vegetables like ridge gourd, cucumber, pumpkin, string bean and yam in plenty. Aunt would tend the garden with great care with help from farmhands.

She would send a cowherd to the market to sell the harvest. She would sell coconuts, areca nuts, mangoes, jackfruits, rice, green gram, black gram, and give the money to my mother.

One day, mother admonished her, "Hey, what are you doing? Don't you feel embarrassed? You sell even the guavas, ridge guards and cucumbers!"

One had to witness aunt's wrath! She shot back angrily, "Why, do I steal from somebody's house? The old man renounced everything in his life. Although he was highly educated, he didn't

accept any government job. He served his motherland. He did not even buy a piece of land in the city as he always claimed that he was a farmer. I sold vegetables and fruits of his garden. It would be spent on buying his medicines. When we went to jail, our hands handcuffed, why, did we feel embarrassed? Why should we feel embarrassed now? Money is spent like water on the old man's treatment. Have you ever thought where all the money would come from? Does he get any pension or has he saved any money?"

Mother gave in before aunt's arguments. Since that day, aunt began offering her services indirectly to a great patriot. She did not ask mother to stay back even for once. She would say, "The old man must be looking for you. You should be with him."

After my father passed away, the two friends set to work on their life's mission together. One of our neighbours lived in Puri. Aunt kept a watch over his house. One of the rooms of his house was made into a labour room. If any poor woman fell ill, aunt would shelter her in this room.

Her treatment would be taken care of by the women of our village. Everybody helped in whichever way they could. Someone would stay near the patient to pass scissors, hot water, cotton to aunt. Another would send barley, sago or a light meal for the patient. Someone would offer roasted flattened rice; another would bring a handful of rice flakes or a glass of hot milk. Aunt exercised a lot of influence on them all. She instilled a spirit of sacrifice in the hearts of the village women. Everyone felt happy if they could be of help to fellow humans in some way.

I remember the houses of Mankada Gopal and Nandi Balia. Half of the houses in our village lie vacant. When I remember the silence hanging over these vacant houses, tears flood into my sleep-laden eyes. Memories flicker in my mind's mirror. Our village was full of bustle on the night before the Kartika purnima. Children and old people holding banana-stem boats and lanterns would walk in a procession. They would float their boats in the river, take a dip in it early in the morning in the dead of winter, and come back home in wet clothes.

Again, I remember the dawn of Dwitiya festival. Married women would go in a procession holding baskets filled with green gram sprouts, coconuts, cucumbers, palm fruits, lamps, incense and flowers. Countless children irrespective of caste and creed would surround them. After the women offered worship to kites and vultures, they would distribute the food-offerings among the children. Back at home, green gram sprouts would be cooked. I recall the pale faces of the fasting women in the cow-dust hours on the Bali trutiya day. They would take bath, rubbing turmeric paste on their bodies. They would splash water at each other. Winding their hands around each others' waist, they offered flowers and sindoor to the holy patterns drawn on the riverbed, a ritual meant to gratify lord Shiva. All these faces have been erased by the currents of time. These would appear before me one after another. Subhabou bhauja, Mahi's mother, Sushila bhauja, Nayan bou, Rama bhauja—their words would warm up my mind and body. Aunt's ideals had left a deep impact on each of them.

One day, in the autumn of aunt's life, Satya told her, "Sana bou! I would bring two application forms. Now-a-days, freedom fighters receive stipends for the services they have rendered to the nation. All that the two of you need to do is to sign the forms. I would take care of the rest."

Aunt laughed and called her Gangapani, "Listen! We're getting paid for our services to our country."

"Hey, Satya!" My mother answered, "Did we free the country for this? We see how people suffer. The government offers some money and silences the freedom fighters. No one would then fight against them." The two friends proudly refused to accept the stipend offered to freedom fighters. I feel humble when I remember these two women—one had very little education and the other was unlettered. How noble was their judgement! The government of India offered stipends to freedom fighters only to silence them. No one would have the voice to oppose a corrupt government. How they had realised this truth even then!



However, aunt had accepted another prize with pride. When Lingaraj Mishra was the health minister of Odisha, he had opened a health centre in Sakshigopal hospital premises. He had named a room with two beds “Dhanamani Matru Mangala Kendra” after aunt’s name. This had seemed to her, her supreme achievement and filled her with utmost satisfaction. Till the end of her life, aunt would lie on a bed by the window at nights; her ears alert to the slightest sound even in her sleep. She would wonder if anyone’s daughter or daughter-in-law had labour pains. She would remain preoccupied with these worries. She would forget all about her failing health and inability to walk properly.

One day, I learnt that my mother was down with high fever. I reached home immediately to bring her over to Puri. Aunt requested me not to do so. Her drawn, sad, tearful eyes remains etched in my heart forever. She said—“Don’t take my Gangapani away from me. Would she let me go anywhere? How could you take her from here?” No one could ignore such heart-rending request. While coming back, I requested the doctor at Satyabadi to look after my mother.

After four days, my mother sent for me. I went there again. Mother said, “All the time, she’d sit and look around blankly. Who knew what was passing in her mind? Maybe, she feared that she couldn’t wake up at someone’s call if she fell asleep? Today in the morning, daughter-in-law came and helped her brush her teeth and have a cup of tea. I called her from this bed many times, but she sat still without uttering a word. I went up to her. The moment I touched her, she dropped back on the bed. Her body was still warm. She went away, leaving me alone. Really, she didn’t wake up again.”

Our village road swarmed with people. Many sons came from all over the place. Everyone was desperate to carry the litter bearing her body. My mother put some ghee, sandalwood, a garland of flowers on the dead body. She touched it for the last time and raised the litter to the children’s shoulders. Her children, grandchildren and many more grandchildren lighted lamps as though they were lighting up her path leading to heaven. Satya led the procession,

holding a burning torch in his hand. The village road resounded with *Harinama* and *Ramanama*. The procession went round the village. Aunt lay under a quilt of flowers and went on her final journey. It was an early morning in the month of Ashwina.

My mother took a head bath even while running a temperature. I came to know that day that mother was two years younger than aunt. I came back to Puri bringing mother with me. Once, one of mother's legs had got fractured; it had been operated on and iron rods were placed inside to support her bones. She had remained fit in spite of this, but, after aunt passed away, she gradually grew weak. She took the help of an invalid chair to move around. Slowly, her words became incoherent. Exactly two years later, on a cold Ashwina morning, mother called me, "Look, I heard Gangapani calling me; she went to the backyard before I woke up. She's going away. Call her. I'll go with her."

I began to sob, burying my face in my mother's bosom. I told her, "No. She would never call you. Who is she? Why would you go with her, leaving us?"

Mother patted my back softly and said, "True, she didn't belong to me, but her husband had left her in my care. It's easy to build a temple, but shaping a human being is an extremely difficult task." And, in this case, it was looking after someone who did not belong to oneself. I remembered Loka aunt's words which I had heard from my mother—"Don't crave for something which belongs to someone else, it'll be taken away from you in a moment." My mother and aunt were friends for eighty long years. No one except God could come between them. Mother passed away exactly two years after aunt's death. She must have met her Gangapani, awaiting her, on an evening in Ashwina. Who knows where the streams of the Ganga and that of Yamuna met, in heaven or on the earth, and created another holy confluence.

(Para padartha, pp. 55-65)



## Sanghamitra Mishra (b. 1953)

Sanghamitra Mishra was born on 20 June 1953 in Khandasahi, Cuttack. Her father, Bansidhar Mishra was a freedom fighter and mother, Srimati Devi, a pious woman. Sanghamitra studied at Pranatanth College, Khurda, and Utkal University, Bhubaneswar. In 1970, when she was only seventeen, she married Jagannath Mohapatra, who was a doctor and later served as the Chairman of Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation. She continued her studies even after marriage and topped the post-graduation examination in Odia from Utkal University. She earned doctoral degree from Utkal University in 1986 for her research on the plays of Manoranjan Das. She was conferred the D.Lit. degree by Utkal University for her comparative study of symbolism in Odia and Hindi literature in 1996.

She started her career as a lecturer in Odia at BJB Evening College in 1977. She taught at Ramadevi Women's College before joining the Department of Odia at Utkal University as a lecturer in 1986. She retired as a professor of Odia from Utkal University in 2013. In her long academic career, she has guided twenty-two Ph.D. scholars and one D.Lit. scholar.

As an academic and critic, she has worked and written extensively on the evolution and growth of Odia plays. Apart from academic books, she has also written poems, short stories and biographies. She has to her credit around forty books and a large number of yet-to-be anthologised articles.

Her memoir, *Sadichhara sahasra dhara* was serialised in the

newspaper *Sambad kalika* once in a week from 2007 to 2011. Her father had left his young wife, Srimati and infant daughter, Krishna Ballavi in 1928 to escape arrest by the British only to come back home after twenty-five years. Her mother's ordeal after this incident forms a significant part of her reminiscences. She also writes about her career as a teacher of Odia literature at three of the premiere institutes in Odisha. The excerpts selected here sensitively explore her relationship with her elder sister, Krishna Ballavi Rath. Her emphasis on human relationship as a source of enduring influence in one's life could be noticed here

### **My Elder Sister**

I don't know why when I remember my elder sister, the tide of time begins to ebb. Let me begin by mentioning what I have heard about her from others.

My elder sister was born in September, 1928, and was twenty-five years older than me. Gopabandhu Das passed away in the year in which she was born, and my father had already made up his mind to go abroad and lead a life of anonymity. He left his wife, who was then seventeen and his three-months-old daughter, and embarked upon his journey as though responding to an irresistible call from far. He escaped the British surveillance, took the sea route from Sri Lanka, braved numerous dangers, and finally reached London. He introduced himself as Surat Ali there and became a trade union leader. His three-months-old daughter grew up among her grandparents and her mother in the village, and started going to school. She was an extremely stubborn child. My mother had told me several times how she used to put her in awkward situations. Once, she pleaded with mother and asked her to pick up some areca-nut peels which lay in the drain. When my mother did not do as she said, she started crying. This made my mother's mother-in-law and aunt-in-law angry and they told mother off. My mother would often become absentminded while recalling this episode.

My aunt told me of the following incident—once, when she was eating pakhala, my sister turned up at her house. My aunt said,

“Budhi, will you hand me the pot of salt.” My sister shot back bluntly, “Did you know that I’d come? If you forgot to bring the pot of salt before sitting down to have your meal, take your food without salt.”

When she attained puberty, she herself stopped going to school. She thought that she should not give anyone an opportunity to tell her that she should not go to school. She did not even go to collect her scholarship money from school. When her in-laws came to see her before her marriage was arranged, she declared that she would never draw a veil on her head and candidly told her husband that she did not know how to prepare a paan. She also refused to pierce her nose even when her mother-in-law pressed her to do so. Such was my elder sister—honest and forthright. Her mother-in-law treated her harshly when she first went to her in-laws’ place. But later, she became dependent on her and would seek her out all the time. She had so great a faith in my sister that whenever she fell ill, she would advise her against sending word to her son. She would say—“What more would he do?”

My sister had no children. If she had, they would have been hardly nine or ten years younger than me. True, my mother gave birth to me, but I grew up in my sister’s care. I learnt from her how to speak politely to others and how to be hospitable to guests. She brought for me a sari when I first started wearing saris. She would bring for me a frock, a shawl and a pullover the day before the Prathamastami. She would stitch buttons on my pullovers so that I would have no difficulty while putting them on. If there was anyone other than my mother who influenced me deeply in my life, it was my elder sister.

A woman’s association was to be set up in our village. She was the first to come out to join it. Peni nani, our village landlord’s daughter, would follow her example. I had heard that she had set up a village development association and had invited Rajkrushna Bose, Ramadevi and others to one of its meetings. She had talked to them about our father at the meeting and had sought Rajkrushna

Bose's help in locating him. As a result, the government took steps to bring back our father to India.

My sister was like an open window to me. She not only brought new dresses, shoes and good books for me, but also made me aware of the world outside. She also told me off when I did not obey her. I must have been studying in class six then. Once I came to Bhubaneswar with her. She had rented a room in a building there. The building was supplied with piped water, and if, by chance, anyone forgot to turn off the tap, water flowed out of it for hours on end. But the house-owner had instructed my sister to take water from the well. Every day, she would draw water from a stone well in a bucket. Once I put the mug used in latrine in the bucket. She told me off and warned me that she would send me back to village if I did this again. The next day, I said, "Water is running from the tap. Let me go and collect two, three bucketfuls of water for our use. No one would know of this." She became even angrier than she had been on the previous day. Later, she explained to me why I should never think of doing such a thing.

If I started writing about her, my narrative would never come to an end. She worked at the Khadi Board in Bhubaneswar. At that time, she was learning Hindi; I used to read her books with eagerness and wanted to master Hindi like she had done. In a few days, I succeeded in doing so. She taught me how to write an application. I learnt from her how to put a cover on a book. No one could make pancakes and sun-dried badis like she did. But life was unkind to her. She never found fulfillment in her personal life. She was deprived of a father's love in her childhood. She received the respect due to her at her in-laws' house, but only for a few days.

I have a feeling she did not relate to her husband emotionally. This part of her life still remains a mystery to me. There was no one who could lessen her obstinacy or willfulness. Had she had any children, her life might have been different. May be, her experiences made her self-willed, and she always went her way. The following was written near her bed— "God is the first friend of

human beings, books come second.” I loved going out with my sister, because I never thought I could go out with anyone else. She had a big note-book. On its first page was written, “No one should open this before my death.” I had seen this notebook once or twice. I even had a chance to read a few pages from it. Perhaps she suspected this and hid it away somewhere. I never found that notebook afterwards. Even after she died, while rummaging for a photo, I tried to locate that notebook among her papers, but it was lost forever. If I had gone through the notebook, I would have learnt more about her sorrows and joys.

The Khadi Gramodyog Training Centre was situated in Kedargouri in Bhubaneswar. Everybody who worked there thought I was my elder sister’s daughter. The girls, who took training there, loved me dearly. When my sister and her husband went to our village for two, three days, these few days would seem like festive occasions in our house. But I must have seen them together in our village only twice or thrice in my life.

This is what fate had decreed for me. No happiness is permanent for me; every moment of happiness slips away before I could relish it. However, there is nothing strange about it. I shall certainly write about my elder sister again. I would not feel good if I did not write something about her in-laws’ family.

## II

My elder sister was more like a second mother to me than a friend. I never could measure her love for me nor could I ever be able to do so. I felt sad when she left home to work at the Khadi Board when I was a child. I thought I would no longer be able to go out holding her hand. I would no longer be able to learn singing from her. Father would surely be angry at me while teaching me. Who would comfort me then? But every time she came home, she brought a lot of presents for me. Once, I went with her to Ranpur. I had a chance to see Nandini Devi there. I visited the Jagannath temple, Maninaga hill, and the abode of the goddess there. My future life also got tied up with Ranpur; I shall tell of this later.

My sister got transferred to Bhubaneswar. The training centre of Khadi and Gramodyog was housed in a two-storied building in Kedargouri. She lived there. Another of her colleague, Sukha nani also lived with her. In rank, she was my sister's senior, but she looked up to her as an elder and gave her the respect due to her. The girls who were undergoing training used to call my sister "Didi", but she asked them to call her "Guruji" instead. She came to be popularly known by this name.

My sister did all her work meticulously. Be it making patterns on the floor with rice batter, preparing pancakes with rice and black gram batter or knitting, she could do all these skillfully. She did all the household chores and read books, wrote stories when she had time. She used to sing, but stopped to do so afterwards. When I fell ill with an infection in my throat, she took me to Dr Tarasia. We stayed at Sukha nani's quarters in Bhubaneswar; she would sit by me night after night till I got well. When she came to the village, my mother would prepare arisa pitha for her. If in case she could not, she surely made pitha with grated coconut.

My sister would sometimes talk about her office and the conditions of a handful of working women in those days. The manner in which she wore a sari and drew the veil over her head and the tiny vermilion dot on her forehead inspired respect even from her higher officials. Later, she rose to the rank of a supervisor at the Khadi Board. She toured the Khadi centres all over Odisha and got a chance to prove her efficiency.

She had enabled many poor and unfortunate girls and women earn their living by providing them training. Among them was one Mandakini-apa. My sister had told me that she had met Mandari when the latter was boiling rice burning dry leaves. She got her enrolled in Amara Charkha Training Centre by paying fifty paisa from her own pocket. My sister wrote her name down as "Mandakini" in the admission register. Mandakini-apa looked after her sick husband and their only daughter and took the responsibility of the household as the head of a joint family. She came frequently



to our house. She used to call my parents ‘father’ and ‘mother’ and unhesitatingly nursed my father when he was taken ill.

Short stories written by my sister were published in the magazine, *Yuganari*. One story titled “Bibhrantichouka” dealt with the theme of the clash between modernity and tradition. It also depicted the slippery path of desire and lust which one comes across when one is engaged in the struggle for existence. The story asked the readers what path women must choose. She published an anthology titled *Saptapushpa*, which contained the stories that had already been published in *Yuganari*. I still have a copy of that short story collection. Her stories and one act plays also got published in the magazine *Gramodaya*.

How swiftly time flies! When I read her writings, I wished if I could write like her. But whom would I confide this in? I would light a lamp of hope in an inner recess of my heart. She told me numerous stories. She would tell me about her in-laws’ family. But I have seen her and my brother-in-law hardly two or three times together when they came to our village. Once she came in the winter. She had brought with her loads of cauliflowers, tomatoes and sweets. I felt overwhelmed by the gifts she had brought for me—books, ribbons, pens, pencils, shoes and notebooks. Did I ever bother about whether she came alone or with her husband!

Long afterwards, I became aware of the gulf that separated her from her husband. By then my brother-in-law was bed-ridden and my sister nursed him with great devotion. My brother-in-law told me, “How could your sister know when I turn on the bed? Was she a friend of prince Lakshman?”

My sister could have been a good home-maker, but did not become one. She could have been a good writer, but that, too, did not happen. She could have led a life full of comfort and luxury with her husband, but that was not to be. My mother often said, “Be it rice pudding, be it pancakes, these can never match rice; be it your maternal grandmother or brother, they can never be compared with your husband.” Her husband met an untimely death and left

her alone in this world. She faced all the difficulties bravely and managed the household of her in-laws in Jatani, to which she had never laid any claim.

She could knit with great dexterity. On a piece of cloth, she had embroidered designs of creepers and flowers in the border and in the middle had knitted—“Biswanath Durgabanshi Srimati; may my heart remain at their feet. May they shower their love and blessings on me.” She had framed it and hung it on the wall. Once, when the glass broke I noticed the intricate patterns of needle work. I realised that her father-in-law’s name was Biswanath and mother-in-law’s name was Durga. This had a deep impact on me. How much love she held for her ancestors, but she received no care or attention from her in-laws’ family during her last days!

Let me close here. I feel disturbed when I remember the life of my sister. Hope the readers will understand me.

**(“Mo nanira katha”, Sambad kalika,  
10 April 2009 & 23 October 2009)**



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## About the Editor

Supriya Prasanta writes poetry, fiction and non-fiction in Odia, her mother tongue, as well as English. Her Odia writings include two novels, one collection of short stories and a research book on life writing by Odia women writers. Recently, she has also rendered the fifteenth century Odia *Mahabharata* by Sarala Das into Odia and English prose narratives.

She has translated a number of Odia classics into English, which include Upendra Kishore Das' *Malaajabna* (The Dying Moon, Odisha Sahitya Akademi, 2017; Rupantar 2006), Mohapatra Nilamoni Sahoo's *Abhishapta Gandharva* (The Fallen Gandharva and Other Stories, Odisha Sahitya Akademi, 2016). She has also edited and collaborated on several women's writing anthologies that include *One Step towards the Sun* (Rupantar, 2010; coeditor: Valerie Henitiuk), *Spark of Light* (Athabasca University Press, 2016; coeditor: Valerie Henitiuk), *Burning Mountains* (Dhauri Books, 2018) and *Contours of Salvation* (Timepass, 2019).

A former editor at Cambridge University Press India, she has received the Charles Wallace Translation Fellowship and a residency at the British Centre for Literary Centre for Translation, Norwich in 2009. She was offered the Junior fellowship from the Ministry of Culture, Government of India from 2008-2010 for her research on Odia women's writing. She received the SRTT Library fellowship from School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University to undertake a study of Bengali women's writing and women's movement in India. Her research interests include world literature, Odisha studies and women's studies.

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# The Memory Makers

Women Autobiographers of Odisha

My life would have lost itself in anonymity and listlessness; but I recall an incident which changed my outlook: The seed of a peepul tree came floating in the wind and fell into a crevice in my roof and grew into a tree. The old roof leaks at a hundred places, but the tree has been growing slowly and steadily. He, who has created it, alone knows how it gathers sap from the roof. Who knows how the creator sowed a handful of seeds of knowledge in the desert of my heart? The sight of the peepul tree on the roof amazed me and stirred my imagination and led it to construct one sentence after another.

**Sitadevi Khadanga**, *Mora jeevan smriti*

I had taken with me a bundle of yarn spun on an unsteady spinning wheel at home. My mother-in-law had warned me against offering any ornaments to Gandhiji even if he asked for them. As usual I heeded her advice and did not donate any of my ornaments. When I offered Gandhiji the bundle of yarn, he gave me a look—a strange, deep look, which still haunts me.

**Ramadevi Choudhury**, *Jeevan pathe*

I cried most of the time as no arrangements could be made regarding our studies. Jyotsna remained indifferent in this matter. I gave up hope and tried to commit suicide. Mother informed my father of this in a letter. I even contemplated embracing Christianity in order to continue my studies.

**Bina Dei**, *Akinchanara jeevan smriti*

We ran several campaigns against the brewing and sale of liquor. We mobilised women from villages and held meetings. At many places, brewing of liquor could be stopped, but the practice continued in Dongasili. We planned to smash the liquor pots there.

**Sumani Jhodia**, *Muin Sumani kabuche*

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